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PRINCESS BRINDA

By

MAURICE DEKOBRA

(Author of "The Madonna of the Sleeping Cars," etc.)

TRANSLATED FROM

"LA PRISON DES REVES"

BY METCALFE WOOD

LONDON

T. WERNER LAURIE LTD.

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*No scene in this story is taken from life
and all the characters are purely imaginative*



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I

LAUGHTER, merriment and song echoed that evening through the château d'Offreville. The distribution of prizes had taken place in the morning under the ægis of Mme. de Vicelles, head mistress of the school.

Offreville receives fifty young ladies, coaches them for their baccalaureate and at the same time affords them the opportunity of playing tennis, swimming, painting and dancing the rumba. English girls with lily-white complexions and Parisians with sparkling eyes, study the classics together, read forbidden novels in secret and practise the art of driving a little white ball from the first tee to the eighteenth hole!

Dinner was being served in the large dining-hall. Mme. de Vicelles had her show pupil, Princess Brinda, sitting on her right. Her father, the Maharajah of Jahlpore, had sent her there to be educated. Brinda had been a pupil at Offreville for five years. She was remarkable for her industry, her intelligence, her charm of manner and the sweetness of her disposition. Everybody in the place adored Brinda.

During dessert Mme. de Vicelles raised her glass to

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toast Brinda's success. All down the table there were taps of applause.

"Ladies, this evening I have the pleasant duty of publicly congratulating your schoolfellow Brinda, who, not content with passing with special mention the first part of her baccalaureate, has taken all the prizes in her class. . . . It is said that light comes to us from the East. . . . Anyhow, I can state that a good example comes to you from India, for our dear Brinda first saw the light of day on the banks of the Ganges. . . . I drink to the health of the daughter of His Highness the Maharajah of Jahlpore, who honours our establishment and has brought fresh laurels to the château d'Offreville!"

There were bravoos on all sides, followed by the usual exclamations:

"Cheerio, Brinda. . . . Tchin, tchin, darling! . . . Long live Brinda. . . ."

Her neighbours kissed her. Her companions in class clinked their glasses.

"Brinda, what was the date of the taking of Algiers?"

"Brinda, recite Lamartine's Lake to us!"

"I bet you don't remember now who Salambo is?"

"Give us the formula for nitric acid. . . ."

Brinda smiled, happy in her white dress which showed up her pale complexion. She was eighteen, very pretty, with well-cut features, a small mouth, geranium-coloured lips and pale lazulite eyes—blue eyes that one rarely sees in the East.

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She spoke perfect French; it was only the intonation that betrayed her foreign birth. She protested:

"I am overwhelmed by such honours and embarrassed by all your questions. . . . I beg you, Madame! "

And turning to the head mistress:

"Tell my schoolfellows that dictionaries, lexicons and précis of literature have been put away for two months. . . . This evening, merriment and light-heartedness are the order of the day and, as a poet in my country says: 'the rose itself no longer has any thorns.'"

Mme. de Vicelles stood up.

"You are right, Brinda. . . . Let us forget the square on the hypotenuse and look forward with enjoyment to the coming holidays. . . . My dear girls, our guests will be here soon. I will meet you in a quarter of an hour in the large hall."

Irene de Meyrignac, Brinda's best friend, led her into the entrance hall to show her the floral decorations—her work.

"Look, darling. . . . How do you like that? Pretty, eh? . . . Simone, Lisette, Regine and Anna, who have got up a jazz band, will be on the platform. . . . They are definitely amazing, you know. . . . They can give points to Jack Hylton and his band! My dear, if you only saw the effect that Anna creates when she blows the saxophone. She balloons out her cheeks like that! "

"And what does Lisette play? "

"The drum, my child! . . . I think she must have had a great-grandfather who was a drum-major in the

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Garde Nationale! She knows every military bugle call."

The boarders at Offreville, all in white, were in the hall. They were talking in groups, powdering the tips of their noses, practising the tango without music and exchanging ideas regarding the holidays.

The fête was in full swing. Wearing American sailors' white caps, the four instrumentalists were playing blues and fox-trots. Irene was right. These young ladies would not have been out-classed on the terrace of a casino. What dash! What rhythm! Anna dragged from her saxophone the squeals of a home-sick cat. Regine flourished her bow with eyes half closed. Simone conducted at the piano and Lisette waved the drumsticks as she sang "Ain't she sweet" like a regular habituée of a Broadway night-club. Irene had danced for half an hour with her boy friends when suddenly she asked one of her schoolfellows:

"Have you seen Brinda?"

"No. Isn't she dancing this evening?"

"Why not?"

"What has become of her?"

Irene left her partner to look for her. She could not find her in any of the rooms nor in the hall nor the library. Astonished, she searched the park, where several couples were promenading. Nobody had seen Brinda. More and more intrigued, she inquired of Mlle. Martelier, a mistress who was on duty.

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"Brinda? . . . Why, I haven't seen her since a telegram came for her."

"A telegram?"

"Yes. About half an hour ago. . . ."

"Did she say anything?"

"No. She went into the library. She may be there still."

Irene knew that there was no one there. She went at once to the second floor, where Brinda's room was, next to her own. The door was shut. She knocked. As she did not get any answer, she knocked again. Feeling worried, she went into the room and gave a cry. Brinda was lying on the floor. The opened telegram had fallen from her lifeless hand.

.
She rushed up to her.

"Darling! . . . What is the matter? . . . For the love of heaven, tell me!"

She picked up the telegram, and, longing to know why Brinda had fainted, she read it.

CALCUTTA, 24th July.

His Highness has decided that you shall end your studies in France immediately. Stop. Return by the steamer "Empress of India" 30 July. Stop. Mme. de Vicelles will receive instructions to take you to Marseilles 29. Respectful good wishes: Karam Sing, chief private secretary.

Irene realized what a blow this message was to

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Brinda. She must rouse her at once from her faint. She had already been in it too long. She ran to inform Mme. de Vicelles. A doctor was sent for, the father of one of the pupils. He said that it was a fainting fit brought on by the shock of the news that she had received; he soon revived her and advised her to rest for a time.

"You are not afraid of being alone in your room, my dear?" the head mistress asked, bending over her.

"No, Madame. . . . I'm feeling better. . . . Please go down and look after your guests. . . . I am quite all right here."

Irene remained alone with her friend. Although the door was shut, one could hear the muffled sounds of the syncopated jazz tunes. Through the open window giving on to the park one could see the lawns lit by the lights from the rooms, and the tops of the tall trees tipped with silver by the moon. Brinda, lying on her bed, gazed at Irene, her eyes heavy and unspeakably sad, her heart overcome with grief. She gripped the hand of her friend, her confidant, who for five years had shared her joys and sorrows.

There was a long silence; the soft melody of a tango floated up to them. Then, as though this distant and soothing music had encouraged her to open her heart, Brinda murmured:

"Irene. . . . You have read the telegram?"

"Yes. . . . But I can't believe it's true!"

"Alas!"

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"Brinda! It can't be. . . . Your father can't want you to go back there when you have just done so marvellously in the first part of your degree and you are working to complete it. . . ."

"Alas! "

"He must be mad. That's the plain truth. . . . You must send a telegram telling him that you want to stay in France."

A faint smile hovered round Brinda's half-opened lips.

"But, my dear child, you surely realize that my father is not like a Western father who studies his daughter's caprices. I am born in a country where wives are still the slaves of their lord and master. Much more so their daughters! You know that except for a few emancipated families in Calcutta, converted to Bramo Samaj, true followers of our ancient orthodox religion, like my father, do not tolerate European ideas."

"But anyway, Brinda, your father has given you a European education."

"Yes. . . . Because my mother did not belong to his race. But, deep down in my mind, I know quite well where his secret sympathies lie."

"Then you must go? "

"Yes. In four days. . . . Karam Sing is quite definite in his cable."

"It's terrible! . . . You can't leave us, Brinda! "

"Irene, your sorrow is nothing compared with mine. . . . During five years since I left Jahlpore I have for-

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gotten my country, I have lost touch with the zenana mode of life."

"What do you mean, Brinda?"

"The Hindu harem, like the purdah of the Moslems, is a prison for women of high caste. . . . A prison gilded and perfumed; that is all that there is for me over there where I am going to be placed once more by the will of my father."

"How do you know?"

"He hinted at it in his last letter, two months ago. But I did not take it seriously."

"Brinda, don't go!"

"I cannot disobey, Irene. . . ."

The little princess sighed. She pressed her friend's hand with emotion. Then, very softly, she murmured:

"That is not all. There is something worse!"

"What do you mean?"

"My father has arranged for me to be married."

"Already!"

"You will never guess with whom! . . . With Keshab Sandra, a young prince of Bengal, son of a Rajah whose small state borders Jahlpore. . . . Karam Sing has sent me his photograph. . . . He is a heavily built young man with thick lips and great round eyes like a boiled fish; very dark skinned and has never been to Europe. He has learnt English at Benares University. The mere thought of marrying him fills me with horror."

"But it is impossible!"

"You are talking like a young emancipated French

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girl who can choose her husband. I am afraid that my father will impose his will on me when I return. . . . He has already intimated his wish in his last letter. I wrote back that I did not want to marry anyone. . . . The result, as you see, is my immediate recall. . . . I am in despair."

Irene, who was sitting on the side of the bed, instinctively threw herself into her companion's arms. She also was suffering at the thought of losing her best and truest friend. Tears came into her eyes.

"You mustn't leave me. . . . You mustn't . . . you mustn't! "

Brinda returned her embrace and sobbed. She stroked Irene's cheeks, whispering:

"I, too, long to stay. . . . If you but knew. But don't cry, my dear little René. . . . Remember that this evening the college is *en fête*. Happiness reigns. . . . Come now, dry your eyes and go down to your companions who are enjoying themselves. . . . Go, my dear, go and dance with them."

Irene, in reply, embraced her more tightly and exclaimed with emotion:

"Go and dance now? . . . Leave you by yourself? . . . You are mad. . . . I shall stay with you. . . . I will share your sorrow; it is mine as well."

"You are good. . . . You are kind. . . . Irene, I shall remember when I am over there that you were always my ray of sunshine in your beautiful country. . . . And when I am unhappy, as I feel sure I shall be, I shall

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try to forget my sorrow by thinking of the days we have spent together—alas! all too short. I shall think of you every evening in my exile, and when I feel I want to cry, it will only be necessary for me to look in the mirror to imagine your smiling face and your pure crystal eyes so full of true friendship. . . . I beg you, dear, don't cry any more. . . . Let me have the strength of will to obey my father's orders. . . .”

An Hawaiian song floated through the calm night air. The jazz went on below. They were still dancing whilst above two young girls confided to each other their deep grief at the thought of their coming separation. Clasp- ing each other, they were like a couple of lovebirds sheltering in the fork of a tree from the cold breeze in the forest.

II

THE scorching sun was baking the palms in the palace gardens at Jahlpore. But it was cool in the zenana, where four women were resting: the Maharanee and her three maids of honour, Savitri, Mirra and Parvati. It was the siesta hour, disturbed only by the splash of the fountain in the green marble bowl, and by Mirra, humming under her breath.

Suddenly a rustle from behind the carved wooden door, covered with scrolls and leaves, like lace, had just interrupted the song. The noise became definite. Someone tapped.

Mirra, the singer, and the two other maids of honour looked at their mistress, dutifully awaiting her decision. Sitting majestically propped up with cushions, heavy and portly in her robe shimmering with gold sequins, the Maharanee meditated. She was a very beautiful woman, unfortunately already too stout at thirty-five. The beauty of her features, the imposing dignity of her expression, added to her apparent obesity. Over her eyes she had let fall her weary lids, heavy with kohl. The gentle tap on the door, which out of deference had

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not been repeated, seemed to have plunged her into deep thought.

As a matter of fact, the Maharanee, as well as her maids, knew that the person who knocked was the slave whose duty it was to arrange the menu of their meal and to bring it to them. However, they did not hasten to open the door, because to enter the zenana is a serious matter.

The Maharanee at length raised her plump hand—her fingers covered with jewels—as a sign of consent, and Mirra hurried forward in her purple muslin robe. Her eager haste brought a smile of satisfaction to the lips of her mistress. Maybe, because she was not so pretty as the Prince's other favourites, the Maharanee made more fuss of her than all the rest of the women in the palace. This favour gave Mirra the privilege of addressing her as "my dear," whilst the others called her "Princess."

Under Mirra's touch the embossed handle turned. The slave appeared, carrying in her two hands, like a votive offering, a well-filled salver. She remained in this position until it pleased the Maharanee to clap her hands. She then put the sweetmeats on a small round table in the middle of the room, after which she bowed to the ground to each of the women, her hands touching her forehead in sign of reverence. After that she walked backwards to the door and disappeared silently like a shadow.

The three ladies-in-waiting carried the table to the divan where their mistress was resting. She crunched

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some *shandesh*. She was just going to ask Mirra to tell her the latest gossip in the palace when there was a loud knock at the door.

Perhaps because this visit was not expected, and curiosity was very highly developed in her, the Maharanee gave the order to let in this new arrival at once.

It was also a woman. A plain, elderly woman who evidently held privileged rank amongst the personnel of the palace, because without wasting time in salutation and formalities, she went straight up to the Maharanee. Making a pretence at a bow, she blurted out in a breath :

“ The Princess Brinda is coming! ”

The effect was instantaneous. The four women, whose faces had lit up in the hope of pleasant news (since at any rate it would be something new, and novelty was very rare in their monotonous existence), immediately became gloomy.

The Maharanee looked at each of her companions as if to consult them; but one after the other, Parvati, Savitri and Mirra turned away their heads. Then the Princess shrugged her shoulders and murmured softly :

“ Very well, you can go.”

The elderly woman withdrew, walking backwards, not without scrutinizing the faces of the four women to see what effect her news had had on them.

The dislike of the ladies of the Court for Brinda was indeed well known to everybody. They did not even

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wait until the old lady had gone to give free vent to their ill-natured remarks.

As usual, Mirra was the first to lead the attack.

"This cat is coming to see us! What an honour!" she muttered, certain that, in spite of protests, the Maharanee was grateful to her for expressing herself so crudely.

"Rotten stock, rotten fruit!" Savitri blurted out, emboldened by this example.

"Without the word of a lie, this girl is the curse of my life," exclaimed Mirra indignantly.

"Have you noticed with what assurance she pretends to treat us as equals? She, who ought hardly to dare to raise her eyes to us!"

"As equals? You are very modest!" replied Mirra. "If you asked her we should not perhaps be good enough to act as her slaves."

"And all because His Highness committed the mistake of letting her study stupid Western sciences!"

At this remark from Savitri, the Maharanee's smile broadened. She gave a cruel chuckle.

"But do you know the best of all?" whispered Parvati, not daring to speak such a monstrous thing out aloud. "This half-breed amused herself the other day by putting a red ritual spot on her forehead in order to make fun of our faith!"

"If I'd caught her at it I would have rubbed her face with a cactus leaf," said Mirra, outraged.

"Well, there," intervened the Maharanee, who at

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heart was enjoying these remarks. "What do you expect from a girl bred of such a mother?"

"Tell us about the secret of her birth, Princess," Savitri and Mirra begged, for they knew what disgrace had surrounded Brinda's birth. But their mistress took too great pleasure in recalling the shame of the young girl she hated not to take advantage of the opportunity that presented itself.

"She is a half-breed!" continued the Maharanee, infusing into her words her supreme disdain. "Her mother was white. . . . It is about twenty years ago. She was a European, an Austrian. She came from her far-off capital to visit our country. I don't even think she was of good birth. These Europeans have insufferable conceit. The most humble amongst them imagines he flatters us when he deigns to take notice of us. I did not wish to lower myself by seeing her. By caprice His Highness received her. He had no tiger hunting at the moment, so he did not know how to kill time. I cannot say what artifices this woman used, or to what trickery she descended, but she aroused the admiration of the Prince. Exercising extraordinary cunning, she refused the honour that he offered her, and knew how by her wiles to inveigle him to marry her. I shut my eyes to this scandal, thinking that it would be a passing fancy which would not interfere with my position.

"This woman was already old, she was twenty-five, and as for me, I was in the flower of my fifteenth year! But I was mistaken. With her yellow hair, her washed-

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out eyes, the colour of the sky, and her livid skin slightly tinted with rose, this malicious sorceress had cast her spell over our master. The peacefulness of the zenana was disturbed by the discordant sounds of her music-box to which she executed grotesque Western dances. She even taught the Maharajah to dance them like herself! ”

A flush of colour suffused the Maharanee's indignant face.

“ What would he not have done to make this insolent woman smile! For her delight he would have done anything. Our customs were scarcely respected. The master had eyes only for her . . . other women, including myself, his lawful wife, no longer counted. We could merely weep for our lost happiness. Our rooms resounded with the mournful dirges that we sang to our guitars, and our lamentations. They soothed our sorrows! One day, however, even this sad pleasure was denied us. The beautiful foreigner protested; I say beautiful, because one must, I suppose, think so, as she was able to make the Prince love her so much. She had not even a straight nose. It turned up at the end. . . .”

To stress this terrible indictment, the Maharanee turned her faultless profile to the right and to the left.

She continued:

“ Well, beautiful or not beautiful, this woman so beloved became excessively nervous. Our lamentations, natural as they were, offended her ears! She wanted us to discontinue them, and expected us to laugh with her.

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She complained to the Prince. As if by magic, all our musical instruments disappeared from our rooms. We were no longer able to play them. If we wished to weep, we had the cushions on our beds with which to stifle our sobs; the sacred repose of the foreigner must not be interfered with in any way. For, think of it, she was about to become a mother! Everything was done for her. . . . For us—nothing! The child was born. In the zenana we thought ourselves saved—it was a girl! Not at all. That which would have been a disgrace with anyone else increased, if possible, the favours bestowed on her. The Prince hoped to see her live again in his daughter and prolong in his old age the mirage of beauty that this woman had revealed to him. Well, this daughter was Brinda . . .”

Laughter interrupted the Maharanee's story, and following her example her women indulged in exaggerated hilarity.

“Brinda! . . . Brinda! . . .” spluttered Mirra.

“Yes! . . . Brinda . . .” choked her mistress. “For this new Princess . . . the future marvel . . . the Maharajah arranged a special regime. . . . As the mother, that misery of a woman, could not nurse her child, a wet nurse was selected out of more than a hundred who had been summoned for the purpose. It was not the mother who made the choice, it was the Maharajah himself. He refused to let her use the tinned milk on which they rear children in Europe that she had ordered without consulting him.

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"She was powerful evidently, but one day she found out the limit of her power. Love of the Prince had thoroughly gilded for her the bars of the cage . . . she was in a cage. Like others of her race, silly girls of the West, she did not want to learn the sublime beauty of loving submission. Instead of yielding and triumphing by being pliant she tried to win by open hostility. She tried to resist, to command. Love, against the laws of which she tried to revolt, punished her. As the passion of the Prince increased, making him more suspicious and more exacting, her fondness for him declined. The joyous mirage that her happiness had revealed to her began to fade away; his anger bred a more bitter feeling in her. . . ."

The Maharanee tossed her head satirically.

"She complained that she had fallen from the position of his idol to that of a slave who merely satisfied the pleasures of her master. . . . Nothing changed, however, except in her heart. She brought to play against our master recriminations, sulkiness, reproaches. She even dared refusals, which had succeeded at other times. Confident of his power, the Maharajah took no notice. There were terrible scenes between them. The noise even reached us in our solitude and gave us hope that we should after five years get rid of this foreigner's influence over our husband. With the idea of making her jealous, he accorded us renewed favours. That succeeded, on the contrary, in destroying the little affection that the woman still had for him. She refused

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to see him. To win her back he pretended to go away. The beauty took advantage of the leisure he gave her to plan her escape. One fine day . . . Oh! Yes, indeed, a fine day amongst the finest of days, the palace was all in a flutter—the foreigner had vanished. She had gone, leaving her jewels and her daughter, as though she had wished to keep nothing to remind her of the union in which she had been so woefully disappointed. . . . In vain the Maharajah tried to find her. . . . His rage, and I am bound also to add,” whispered the Maharanee, “his grief was terrible. Everyone in the zenana remembers it, for naturally we felt the consequences of what he suffered through her desertion. During these sad hours of rage and grief his caresses were to be dreaded as much as his blows. One thing alone consoled him: the child that she left behind her.”

“What relief could he find in so young a child?” asked Savitri in a contemptuous tone of incredulity.

Mirra, who knew every detail of the drama, gave the Maharanee a knowing look.

“Ha!” she said, “he hoped to find in the little one consolation for the insult of the mother. . . . As the years went by he discovered his mistake. That is why one day he sent her to Europe. Her presence had become hateful to him.”

The Maharanee agreed. Savitri asked:

“Then why has he recalled her from France this month?”

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"To marry her to Keshab Sandra."

"The son of our neighbouring Rajah? "

"Yes. . . . Well, she's good enough for him! "

"In the meantime until she leaves we are forced to put up with her, as formerly I had to tolerate the usurper of my rights! "

"You make a mistake, Princess," whispered Parvati. "The young girl may live in the zenana, but you are its only mistress. Nothing is easier than to make her obey your orders. In any case, you know very well that you can count on us! "

"Do you think that Her Highness has need of your advice? " exclaimed Mirra.

"And you? Do you think that you are the only person who has the right to give advice?" replied Savitri, jealously.

"Quiet, my dears, listen! " ordered the Maharanee, raising her finger to draw their attention to the tap tap of tiny heels along the outer gallery. "In shoes, do you hear! . . . Like her mother! Our sandals are not good enough for her! "

Before the common enemy, the women forgot their squabbles and exchanged knowing glances. The footsteps stopped at the carved door which, without any formalities, was opened from the outside.

"And so? . . ." grumbled the Maharanee, "since when do people enter my apartments in that way? "

At this rebuff Brinda stood in the doorway a little

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abashed. How charming she looked in her golden silk pyjamas with their voluminous trousers and her copper-coloured bolero which threw up the warm amber tint of her complexion! That costume would have made a sensation at Deauville; in the zenana at Jhalpore it was scandalous!

A hostile murmur from the lips of the three favourites greeted the young girl who, overcome with charming confusion, apologized:

"It's only me . . . Brinda!"

"Yes, so I see," replied the Maharanee icily. "But do you think that is an excuse for not knocking? . . ."

The tone of her voice was as unpleasant as it could be.

"I have not been taught to knock before entering a sitting-room, especially in my father's house," retorted the young girl.

She raised her eyes that in the first instant of embarrassment were lowered, and showed under her forehead with its red spot of Siva, two pure blue eyes that gazed at the Maharanee defiantly.

For Brinda, Indian Princess, had her mother's blue eyes. Her complexion was fairer, her forehead higher, her mouth smaller and of a prettier shape than those of the favourites; in short, a charming froward expression like her mother's, and a delicate nose slightly retroussé.

"I am afraid, Madame," she said, "that my presence does not please you. I came because I knew that you received to-day, and that it was my duty to pay you a

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visit. . . . But if I am disturbing you . . .” She made a move towards the door.

That was not what the Maharanee wanted. She was not anxious to see Brinda; however, she realized that it was not diplomatic to send her away. She detained her, motioning her, with a false gentleness, to a cushion near Mirra.

“I did not mean to offend you,” Brinda protested. “It is only because I did not know it was the custom to knock at the door.”

“That depends upon circumstances, but for you coming to my apartment”—the Maharanee emphasized the “you” and “me” to mark the distance—“it seems to me that you should have understood the need. Anyway, I pardon you. There are so many things that you don’t know that one cannot expect you to behave correctly.”

She spoke this peroration in an almost amiable tone of voice.

“Of course I have been away so long!” remarked Brinda with a smile so gracious that it would have softened anyone except the Maharanee and her ladies.

“I can’t yet understand why she has returned. . . . What she is doing here!” whispered Mirra into Savitri’s ear, loud enough for everyone to hear.

Brinda flushed deeply. A flash of resentment lit up her eyes. She could have said to this woman that this palace was her home by right of birth, before it was hers. Respect that the Maharanee had so sharply called

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attention to made her keep silent. She turned to the Princess, expecting her to deliver a fitting rebuke that she did not dare to give herself.

But wilfully far-away and distant, the Maharanee appeared to ignore the affront to her stepdaughter. She was toying with a bracelet that she had just taken off, and throwing it casually, let it fall at Brinda's feet. The three ladies-in-waiting made an immediate move to pick it up. The Maharanee prevented them.

"Leave it alone," she said. "Brinda is young. It will not hurt her to stoop down."

Brinda's double education, Indian and European, had taught her very differently. From her Western training she would have taken no notice of this mean little trick, and would have seen no harm in humouring these women who were her elders. But as an Indian she could not do it. She, a Princess, the admitted daughter of the Maharajah. She was unable to render the Maharanee such a service when three of her ladies-in-waiting were there to do it. Above all, it was done to humiliate her. All that she knew, all that she instinctively felt regarding the customs of her father's race, told her it was too much. This outrage, that she felt in the fibres of her Oriental being, she was ready to forgive in the free spirit of her European training, when the door of the zenana opened wide and the Maharajah appeared.

III

At the sight of the Prince, Mirra, Savitri and Parvati made their bows with such reverence that they almost went on their knees. The Maharanee herself rose from her cushions to go towards him.

Anger accentuated the slowness of this woman weighed down by obesity. As she stood, the amplitude of her robes masked the bulk of her form. Her sequins, her jewels, her massive ear-rings gave her the appearance of a primitive idol whose head was superbly crowned. She took three steps and bent down to kiss the hand that the Maharajah stretched out to her, forming for a moment with him a tableau so truly hieratic that it reminded one of those coloured prints which illustrate certain stories glorifying the Ramayana period.

Behind her stepmother, less ceremonious, but infinitely more sweet in her attitude, Brinda awaited her turn to salute her father. She had no chance. Like a fury, the Maharanee stood erect and, barring the way, she exclaimed in a voice vibrating with hate:

“My lord, what do you think, when I tell you that one of the ladies of this palace has just insulted me in the most gross fashion?”

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The imperturbable Maharajah frowned slightly. He hated to be mixed up in the domestic affairs of the zenana. The wranglings and the rivalries of his wives seemed to him to be absurd. Quite rightly, he felt that he had other things to do beyond entering into quarrels over broken mirrors, stolen or strayed finery, or disputes regarding precedence. When he came to the zenana it was to amuse himself, and the Maharanee generally had the good sense not to bother him with such puerilities.

But to-day her violent behaviour led him to think it was something serious. And that made him more bored than ever. He glanced severely at the three women at his feet as though trying to discover the culprit.

"If you really," he said, "have cause to complain, tell me at once who is to blame."

"She is!" said the Maharanee, standing back to allow Brinda to be seen.

Brinda wished to speak. Her stepmother was too quick for her. She explained her unwarrantable audacity in entering her apartments without knocking and without being asked.

"I ask you, Your Highness," she continued. "This child boasts of being your daughter. Is she to come and be offensive to your humble wife?"

And without waiting to hear what blame the Maharajah seemed disposed to inflict upon his daughter, she ended her invective by pointing with her finger, red with henna, at Brinda:

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"This girl has just refused to do me a service that three of my companions who are considered worthy of your favours were ready and eager to perform for me."

"You demanded this service to humiliate me!" Brinda protested, for the scene disgusted her.

With an imperious wave of the hand the Maharajah bade her be quiet.

"You see the pride of this silly girl," shouted the Maharanee. "What dishonour would it have been for her to pick up my bracelet? As I have said, women of the position of Mirra, Savitri and Parvati were at my feet ready to do it. I asked Brinda in order that she might more fully understand the deference that she appears to think she does not owe me. If she had been amenable, it would have been a pleasure to me to recompense her for this slight proof of her regard."

In finishing this phrase the Maharanee cooed affectedly, and Brinda thought that she preferred, after all, her brutal aversion to her sly tenderness. Feeling certain that her father would not let himself be taken in and would quickly see through the Princess's deceit, she turned to him to claim justice.

But his countenance was severe, he had a hard look on his face. His pursed lips did not part to give vent to his reproaches.

"Brinda, you have just committed a fault of which I hope you are ashamed. Make amends to the Maharanee. . . . You have already been too long over it.

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Pick up the bracelet. . . . This time it is I who order you to do it."

If Brinda had thought of refusing, her father's threatening attitude prevented her. Bending her beautifully flexible body, she picked up, in the tips of her fingers, the bracelet studded with rubies which lay glittering on the brilliant colours of the carpet. Then, standing erect, towering over the Princess by a head, she tossed the jewel at her feet, her eyes expressing contempt, though she did not utter a word. She had been told to pick it up, not to give it back. She had obeyed.

Before anyone had recovered from their amazement at this piece of audacity, Brinda had disappeared. In the distance, along the gallery, the tap tap tap of her little heels died away. Then silence.

As if it were themselves that Brinda had defied, the ladies-in-waiting trembled and rose, ready to console the Maharanee for such an affront. Suddenly the Princess exclaimed:

"Shame on me! Am I so miserable that I have lived to see the day of such an offence? What has happened to me, to my pride, to my race? I have been insulted and I have not died! My husband has seen it and he allows it! "

"Pardon! " protested the Maharajah. "Amazement made me dumb, as it did you. But rest assured, I shall punish Brinda severely for her behaviour." . .

"Your Highness gratifies me! " said the Maharanee banteringly. "I am pleased to know that he does not

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take the part of my enemies. . . . But I want more than that. I desire in future that I may be spared the sight of this creature who reminds me too much of your amours with a Western lady. . . .”

The tone of the Maharanee's voice was both imperious and scornful. It was the voice of a legitimate wife demanding reparation from a guilty husband.

“The zenana in your palace,” she went on, “should not be contaminated by the presence of this she-dog whose mother was an infidel. . . . The very shadow of this half-breed pollutes our food! My patience is at an end! It seems that I have tolerated her presence here so long that now she dares to insult me in front of you! If you resent this affront as you pretend you do, I expect you to take strong measures to remedy it.”

“You may be certain of that . . . and without delay. Whoever offends you, offends me, and it shall not be said, even in respect of one of my children, that I have not known how to exercise my authority. Since you desire it, Brinda shall henceforth be confined to the other end of the palace in her own rooms! ”

With her hands on her heart, the Maharanee bowed, simulating deep gratitude. In reality she was but half-satisfied. This was not the only punishment that she wished Brinda to receive. She desired a complete and definite humiliation.

“I hope,” she replied, dropping her eyes and lowering her voice, “that the rebel will submit to this sequestration. It is bad enough that she flouts me, but it would

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be unbearable to see her treat your orders with contempt! ”

The Maharajah gave a charming smile, and the Maharanee, who was stealthily watching him, was able to gauge, by the exact curve of his lips and the gentle look in his eyes, to what extent her clever suggestion had hit the mark.

“I must in justice acknowledge, my dear wife,” he said, “the deference that you have always accorded me. And your submissiveness only makes me resent more bitterly the hateful independence that I see is showing itself in others. . . .”

The Maharanee bridled up. Nothing pleased her so much as to hear the Prince find fault, even in a covert manner, with Brinda's mother.

“As regards my daughter, don't think I shall allow this to go on. So that she cannot pretend that she has not understood my order properly, I myself will go at once and tell her exactly what I mean. Woman!” he continued, turning to a servant who came running up, “go and warn the Princess Brinda, through her old Danah, to be ready to receive me!” Then, turning to his wives, he added, smiling: “Now, let us forget, I beg you, this painful incident. Let me delight in the pleasant relaxation that I came to enjoy with you.”

At this request a miracle happened. The ladies of the zenana, who had been full of reproaches and protests, became smiling and affable. Instead of reclining on the divan, the Maharanee sat up to make room

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for her husband near her. Around their august persons, Mirra, Savitri and Parvati clustered, putting cushions behind their shoulders and piling mats under their feet.

They placed in front of them the tray of sweetmeats and carried out their duties by offering in turn to the princely couple its delicate dainties, consisting of preserved mangoes, burnt pistachio nuts, sugared almonds and chandra pulu or moon cake.

In a corner of the room, musicians came, immediately the Maharajah was seated, to play their instruments: the esradj, a violin with metal strings, and the tabla or Bengalese drum. Neither the Maharajah nor his wives seemed to listen.

"So," said Mirra, who was the most familiar, "did Your Highness, during his tour of the European capitals, receive visits from the merchants?"

"My dear, things are not conducted exactly as your Indian ideas might lead you to imagine. . . . The merchants of London and Paris did not come to me; I visited them in their enormous bazaars, which are as large as palaces. Furniture, jewels, clothing, tapestries—huge quantities of them—prodigious!"

"Not very artistic evidently!" said the Maharanee, who had no love of Western things and people.

"Don't think that! Over there there are shop windows which would do justice to our treasures. I saw also some displays of rich silks that would have charmed you. . . ."

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"Silks! Those that were fashionable in Paris?" murmured Savitri in ecstasy, her coquetry overcoming every other consideration.

"I should like to see them!" the Maharanee admitted.

"I foresaw this natural desire," said the Maharajah, turning to her. "And as the materials were beautiful and worthy of you, I had several lengths put into my luggage. There will be some for each of you in all shades and for all uses. . . ."

He had said too much or not enough. For now the princesses wanted to know exactly the extent of their presents. The Maharanee did not condescend to take part in the discussion. The enchanting names of the fabrics and laces that are well known even in the heart of the zenanas of Bengal re-echoed through the apartment. Lyons, Maline, Venice, Chantilly . . . their strange sounds kept cropping up in the soft-toned conversation flowing from the Indian lips of the four ladies. Brinda was forgotten.

But the orders that the Maharajah had given concerning her had travelled through the palace. Suddenly there was a knock. The merry chatter was interrupted. Filled with curiosity, the faces of the four women turned towards the doorway, where Brinda's nurse was already standing.

"Come in!" ordered the master.

Old Danah entered, casting nervous glances at the princesses. To make her speak the Maharajah had to

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order her twice. Then, throwing herself at his feet, she murmured:

"Master, you have ordered me to tell my mistress of your visit. Alas! I have knocked at her door in vain. I have called out to her that I came at your bidding. Her door remains closed. My Princess is deaf to my voice! . . . Sleep must have shut her ears! "

She tried to make excuses for Brinda, whom she had nursed and who was more precious in her eyes than gold or the sun.

"It is a very convenient sleepiness," said the Maharanee in a bantering tone, suggesting that it was what she expected!

The Prince sat up, extremely astonished at the news, and perhaps at heart somewhat alarmed.

"I will go and find out what is the matter," he said to his wives, "and if it is just a mulish child's whim, I will see that it is cured."

"Set your mind at rest, Your Highness! . . ." suggested the nurse.

"Come!" retorted the Maharajah. "I may need you."

Danah immediately got up and followed on the heels of the Maharajah, at a respectful distance.

The Prince hurried along the galleries and the courts scented with flowers, cooled by tiny fountains. Twice, thrice his hand pressed the hilt of his sword without drawing it.

"Brinda!" he called out. "Open the door!"

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Not a sound.

"Brinda! . . . you are there. . . . I know you are. . . . You hear me. . . . Open your door. It is not only your father who commands you, it is your master."

Still silence. The Maharajah insisted:

"Realize the seriousness of your behaviour. If you do not open this door, it will be forced! Will you open it? . . . No! . . . Very well."

He called to servants in the corridor:

"Force open that door! . . ."

"Master!" implored the nurse. . . . "There's no doubt she is asleep as I told you. I saw by her face she was very distressed. . . . She told me to go away and let her rest! . . . Master!" she called out more loudly, for the two servants were drowning her voice as they forced the door. . . . "Don't forget that she is your daughter . . . the only one that Heaven has sent you."

"Be quiet," said the Maharajah. "If you interfere I shall send you away from Brinda for having spoilt her!"

The terror of such a prospect rendered her dumb. Who would take care of her child? Who would watch over her and ward off the thousand forms of treachery that always lurk in the human cloisters, if she were not there? She, the faithful, whose devotion was incorruptible?

At last the door gave way.

"Off you go!" commanded the Prince, sending away the servants.

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"You go too, Danah! And only come back when I call you. I wish to be alone with the Princess! . . ."

As he spoke he went into Brinda's apartments. Behind him the corridor was empty as though his words had magically dispelled all human presence. In front of him the room was dark, the curtains drawn; it seemed to be empty. The Maharajah went to the window curtains and in one movement drew them back. The light revealed a form lying prostrate on the bed. With his arms folded he stood for a moment gazing at it.

"Brinda? . . . What is the meaning of this comedy?"

Incensed by the scornful harshness of his tone, Brinda sat up at once, displaying a face stained with tears.

"A comedy? . . . Oh, father, how can you? . . . Haven't you any pity for me? A comedy? When I have just fled from an insult. . . ."

"And what do you call your obstinacy? . . . You refused to let me in . . . I have had to use force."

"I must admit," said Brinda sadly, "that I did not expect you would do that!"

"I am master here, not you!"

"Then where can I go and hide my tears?" she sobbed miserably, as she pressed more tightly a silver frame to her breast. "Where can I find peace, since you have taken me from the white people who loved me and thrown me amongst my own who despise me? What is left to me if you take away the free use of my own rooms?"

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"I shall not take that away from you, Brinda, of that you may be assured. I order you not to leave this room. The rest of the palace is forbidden to you from now onwards. After the insult you have offered her, the Maharanee insists that you do not present yourself to her eyes, and I, you understand, Brinda, I forbid you to disobey this order. You will receive no one here but your servant. When you go out under a guard it will be at a time when my wives do not use the gardens. Your door will be closed as much and perhaps more than you desire, but do not forget that it must always be opened to me at my first request."

"What!" exclaimed Brinda, "so this is a prison?"

"Yes! That is exactly what it is. I have brought you from Europe to marry you to a man of my choice. You have refused. So much the worse for you. . . . You have preferred your jail."

"But what have I done? . . . What have I done to deserve such punishment? One does not punish a woman for having her own thoughts, her own body and her own heart. To get rid of me, at thirteen, you sent me to the West, and now you blame me because I prefer the ways of my mother's race to the customs of your wives who are not initiated to our civilization. Is that my crime?"

"Your crime, Brinda? This is it!"

And he brutally wrenched from her hands the photograph that she was still holding close to her breast.

IV

UNDER a mist of tears Brinda opened her large blue eyes. What reconciliation did the Maharajah wish to effect in his difficulties with the Maharanee by destroying the picture of her mother that he had just taken from her? Anxiously she looked at the Prince. His thick lips were pursed. His brows closely knit. He gazed in silence at the portrait of his former idol.

The photograph had been taken in Vienna only a few months before he had met the handsome Austrian, and reflected faithfully the beautiful features that had charmed him. For her sitting she had chosen a ball-dress cut very low. The corsage revealed her rounded and attractive shoulders and the outlines of her voluptuous figure and all the graces that she had deemed necessary to hide. A three-quarter photograph, a simple but daring pose which threw up all the lines of her body. Magda von Werder, bending her head, gazed at one with a mischievous look. The soft delicacy of her face, the clearness of her complexion, the tender and playful smile on her lips, the lustre of her hair like rays of sunshine round her roguish head, and, above all, her beauty, held one spellbound. Fascinated by its life-like

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splendour, the Maharajah turned from the portrait to his daughter.

"Why did you say what you did?" Brinda asked timidly. "Did you never love my poor mamma?"

"It would have been better for you had I not! I should pardon you more readily for being her living image. It is exactly because I loved her so madly that it is hateful to me to see in you the appearance and the gestures of this woman who has deserted and fooled me regardless of my suffering. Don't forget that through your mother I have already known my greatest grief and my worst humiliations."

"That cannot be! My mother must be as good as she is beautiful."

The Maharajah's lips tightened.

"Alas!" he said, "I was under the same illusion. . . . I was a man. . . . I had not, like you, the excuse of the ingenuousness of youth. But the mirage lasted for some time. To-day I must speak plainly. I wish you to know what a culpable woman your mother is! You speak of her beauty, Brinda, but you know nothing about it. The photograph only gives you a very imperfect idea; it represents her as she appeared to me one evening at a reception in Calcutta at the Residence of the Governor of Bengal; but the intoxicating beauty of her colouring, her vivacity, it gives you no idea. . . ."

His eyes had a far-away expression as he pictured the past. He reflected for a time. Then he continued:

"To understand the magic power of this woman, you

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must have seen her, her sovereign grace transcendent above all those around her, throwing into the shade beauties whose features perhaps surpassed hers in perfection but could not equal them in charm and seductiveness. All the most brilliant members of Calcutta society were present that evening at the Governor's Residence. When Magda von Werder appeared there was not a man who was not enthralled, not a woman who was not jealous. I had just ascended the throne of my august father. And although I had in my zenana women of marvellous beauty chosen from amongst the most precious of human toys, yet I felt myself before this European woman weak and timid as a child longing and hoping only for one thing to happen: that she would notice me. I would have thrown at her feet all the treasures of my principality to have won from her eyes some sign of admiration!

"But things fell out more simply. The Governor, to entertain his European guests who did not know much of Indian life, had arranged in the Residency gardens a display of snakes trained by fakirs. There were, maybe, a dozen of these pious ascetics who wound round their wrists venomous cobras and powerful pythons.

"Considering the number of snakes, the spectacle was very astonishing to Europeans unaccustomed to this kind of entertainment. I saw gentlemen in white dinner jackets and ladies fresh from London who shuddered and turned away. She, my divine unknown, clapped her hands, delighted as a child.

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“ ‘ Oh, those beautiful snakes! ’ I heard her say to the Governor. ‘ They shimmer so, they would make marvellous jewellery. Are they dangerous, Sir Edward? ’

“ I don’t know what he said, but she gave a little cry of fear, from pure affectation, I think, because very collectedly, she added that these creatures would never dare to harm *her*. It was foolish, of course; but at the moment such a thing seemed to me as impossible as it did to her, that the most savage beast, the most venomous snake should wish to attack *her*.

“ Jugglers and dancers followed the snake charmers. . . . The hospitality of the Governor was magnificent, almost oriental in its generosity. His guests were free to wander upon the terraces where the entertainments took place; into the house where there were buffets laden with dainties, and where they could dance or play cards.

“ Many times I saw this fascinating Viennese lady dance the waltzes of her country and the latest tangos introduced from the Argentine. . . . As you can imagine, I had discovered her name and her nationality. . . . As far as I could, I kept near her; but as she danced I lost sight of her and was in a great state of anxiety until I found her again. Suddenly she disappeared entirely. I searched the numerous sitting-out places, both in the house and in the grounds, that the Governor had provided, but I could not find her. And she was not on the terrace. . . . However, she had not gone away entirely, for I had posted one of my aides-

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de-camp at the gate whose duty it was to keep watch. And he had not seen her leave. . . .

"Despondent and doubtful as to what I should do, I leant over the balustrade of the terrace. Near to me a staircase led to the scented darknesses of the park. I could not distinguish the flowers amongst the shadows of the shrubs, but the heavy scent of their blooms rose like thousands of wafted perfumes. I inhaled them sadly, thinking of the fragrance of that unique human flower that I should never be able to breathe. Then suddenly my senses discerned, amidst all the other odours that were almost suffocatingly oppressive, a delicate, fresh perfume. I leant over. . . . On the ground at my feet a shower of white jasmine petals had fallen. I looked for the flower-stem from which the breeze had blown them; no jasmine grew about there.

"Suddenly I remembered that the Governor on greeting Magda von Werder had given her a garland of white jasmine. I had noticed this gallant act, an imitation of our customs, and I had felt annoyed. Now I was glad. These flowers that had fallen there could only have come from the garland that he had tied round her waist. To find her I had only to follow the fallen petals.

"At the foot of the staircase there was a path of fine sand on which it was very easy to distinguish the marks of two small feet. . . . Two feet only! . . . For her sentimental reverie she had gone unescorted. . . . That was a pleasant conclusion to arrive at. Through the

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shrubberies surrounding the tiny lakes her footmarks led to a lonely open space where several streams united, forming a star in liquid silver, in the centre of which was a small circular marble terrace. It was reached by walking on the raised paths between the pools. The place itself was no larger than a pedestal.

"This evening a statue worthy of its setting adorned it . . . a living statue . . . a figure enough to make the gods jealous. Around her waist was wreathed a garland of white jasmine! To approach nearer to her I jumped over one of the marble coping stones. I noticed that it was marked with a long, shiny trail. . . . My mind had not time to take in the meaning of this detail. At the sound of my steps, the statue that suddenly seemed to come to life turned its face towards me, and I saw it bore an expression of terror and despair. The mouth opened to utter an appeal that the constricted throat could not emit. But the hand, with a gesture of tragic eloquence, pointed to a thick band that was gradually encircling her from the ankles.

"I threw myself forward. . . . I realized what had happened. A snake that had evidently escaped from the fakir's basket had come to the water. Chance had brought her in the path of the reptile, obedient only to its master, and it was beginning its strangle hold of her. . . . However, I had reached her and had taken out a little dagger that I always carried in my sash. I struck the python a blow below its neck, breaking its vertebral column, cutting the cold skin of the reptile.

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The long body of the brute started, relinquished its hold and soon fell limp and lifeless.

"Kneeling in front of her, I extricated her from its repugnant coils. We had not spoken. I did not dare to look at her. Overcome at feeling her so near me, all I could do was to caress her ankles. . . . A cold hand touched my neck, I felt her totter, and suddenly she fell fainting.

"Instantly I clasped her to prevent her from falling to the ground, and for several minutes she who was to become your mother allowed herself to lie in my arms.

"I said allowed because she remained like this pressed close to me after she had regained consciousness. I saw a flicker of life come into her eyes. I felt warmth come back into her limbs. However, she did not move.

"You are still too young to understand the coquetry which prompted her to abandon herself like that to the arms of a stranger with whom she realized that she had fallen in love at first sight.

"I longed to cover her enchanting face with caresses. Respect prevented me. Instinct told me that this beautiful creature who now simulated fainting would not have been angry with me. But I was not sure, after all, that she was quite aware of her abandonment, so I hesitated . . . and I suffered. At last I could no longer resist. I let my lips touch her naked shoulder. She sighed and opened her eyes as if the caress had brought her to life. . . . A look of contentment showed itself in her face. I was not deceived. . . . I realized that she

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had known how to take advantage of the opportunity to gain what she wished. Her little deceit was of no consequence, she had lit in my veins a flame of passionate love. I wanted to renew our embrace. She broke away from me, not appearing to notice my attempt. She got up and thanked me quite casually, as if we had only been having a little chat in a drawing-room.

"Shouts and calls rang through the park. The fakir had notified the escape of his pet, and the Governor, who had discovered the disappearance of two of his guests, was searching for us, alarmed for our safety. It was your mother who called out to tell them where we were. She took my arm which, in my confusion, I had not thought of offering to her, and quickly led me to the Governor and his suite.

"Laughing, she gave sensational details of her terror and my bravery, and added that I had behaved in a most skilful and gallant manner. She even added that it was very fortunate that I was such a courteous man, for had it been otherwise she might have had great difficulty in taking care of herself . . . poor little thing abandoned in my arms.

"In saying this, however, she was chaffing me. I felt like either throwing myself at her feet or thrashing her. She evidently saw my annoyance, because there and then she offered me her hand, saying that she must go, this adventure having upset her terribly, but that she looked forward to seeing me next day at her house, where she would like to thank me more profusely. The tender

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pressure which she gave as she said these words suggested the most disturbing thoughts.

"When she had gone, I tried to find out all about her from the Governor. He knew a good deal of her history, because she was a friend of the sister of one of the army doctors, a major, stationed in Calcutta. I also learned that Mme. von Werder had married an important Austrian official much older than herself, was very soon separated and, now divorced, travelled the world sometimes alone, sometimes escorted by a crowd of rich and useless friends, worse companions for her than loneliness. It was with one of these friends that she was staying in Calcutta.

"I am sorry to say it to you, Brinda, but your mother seemed to me that evening somewhat of an adventuress, very attractive, but quite approachable. As facts proved, I was not far wrong. . . ."

Flushing deeply, Brinda tried to protest. The Maharajah bid her be quiet.

"Wait until you know all," he said, "before you judge. I went next day to Mme. von Werder's in full dress, wearing my pearls and my famous emerald collar. You can, I suppose, appreciate the charm and refinement of our oriental costume. The effect on your mother was very marked. Where I was greatly deceived was in thinking that for this reason she would fall more readily into my arms. The very reverse was the case. The more desirable I appeared to be to her the more she wished to hold me in her power by un-

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breakable bonds. The reward that she had appeared to promise me seemed to be limited to the mere pressure of the hand. It was conveyed to me that if I desired anything further I must earn and deserve it. I paid her numerous visits. I was enthralled more and more by those feminine charms always being offered to me yet always refused. But the strange thing is that I was not long the only victim of this dangerous game. Your mother was also attracted. I was young, handsome, rich and powerful. I was passionately in love. As is usual in the end, I overcame her resistance. She loved me, she even . . ."

"There, you see!" exclaimed Brinda.

"But I never doubted that. When I installed her here as my first favourite, she gave herself to me with real passion. She bestowed on me all the gifts of a united love. . . . That is the very reason that I felt her treachery so deeply, when she withdrew the treasures she had given me! If she had only been an ordinary consenting slave, the blow would have been less severe! But for several years she was the most attractive and delightful love. . . . My passion for her was so great that none of my other wives counted. I committed serious wrongs to the Maharanee, my legitimate wife. In order to please your mother, who pretended to be jealous, I never entered, so to speak, the zenana.

"You were born, Brinda, and I spent days of most perfect happiness that man can dream of. So as not

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to interfere with our egoistical love-making, I had you sent to my own mother at Benares. Danah, whom I had selected with infinite care to look after you, was entrusted with the task of bringing you up.

"I cherished and petted your mother in a way that no Maharanee has ever known. I installed in this palace goldsmiths and weavers to work entirely for her in order that she could always have dresses and jewels as she desired. Her capriciousness upset, from morning till night, the arrangement of my gardens. Everybody, like myself, was afraid of displeasing her. A little Burmese gardener was killed one day in going to the top of a blue acacia tree to pick a flower that she wanted. When the flower was brought to her with the corpse she had forgotten all about her fancy for it. It was merely the loss of a slave, so it was of no consequence! I gave a fête to wipe out the remembrance of this sad episode, and it was soon forgotten except by the gardener's mother, whom the Maharanee has always retained in her service. . . .

"My affection made me try and invent new pleasures for her. Alas! she was so spoilt that I only bored her. As one of our yogis has said: The perfume of the heliotrope is torture in the Empire of the magnolias."

V

"THE women in my house were madly jealous of the power she wielded over me. Unknown to me, they plotted in the zenana.

"Although they know nothing about medical science, our women have a very intimate knowledge of certain herbs and beverages. Your mother began to waste away, to grow weak. She had nothing apparently wrong with her; she began to fade each day more and more. *English doctors could not understand it; they could do nothing for her.* I satisfied myself that she was dying of a certain poison. I put her into the hands of one of my doctors. She soon recovered. For greater safety I removed from her entourage suspected servants and dispatched the Maharanee and my other wives to my summer residence at Darjeeling. I made it clear that this banishment was a punishment for their evil deeds; for I had no doubt of their culpability.

"They did not even trouble to deny it. It is supposed to be quite fair with us in such circumstances to use those methods for getting rid of one's enemies. If I had not been so desperately in love with this Viennese

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enchantress, I should not have been so angry. I should have been moved by my wives' tears, for it was necessary to force them from their apartments. They clung to the curtains, the doors, they grovelled at my feet, even at your mother's feet, who had at my request come to see the expulsion.

"Unmoved, your mother witnessed these shocking scenes without appearing to doubt that their cruelty was meant as a compliment to her. She was annoyed with me for having, by my previous marriages, exposed her to these dangers. She even threw it in my face some years later, and commenced a long and bitter list of reproaches: my house was a prison, my love a tyranny. Every effort I made to win her back to me failed. I was not, however, discouraged. As, obviously, India and Hindus had become hateful to her, I tried to keep near her anyone from the West whom I could find.

"I cannot understand now how I could be capable of such aberration. If, instead of abasing myself and studying her tastes, I had only considered my own satisfaction, I should have kept her in my apartments and my happiness would have lasted as long as I wished. But, as she was a European, I was put on my mettle, treated her generously instead of keeping her to myself. I took her out. I experienced foolish pride at seeing her surrounded and sought after by other men, especially by those of her own race. I fondly imagined that it made my triumph in having won her, greater. I hoped also that by comparing my splendour with their

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banality, she would be dazzled again, as she had been on the day of our meeting at the Residence. . . .

"Finding her so cold, I imagined her insensible. Blinded by vanity, I pardoned her flirtations. I even encouraged them, more or less trusting that the coldness of her nature would annihilate all the fires of love that she lit around her, and that I should benefit thereby.

"I ended up by allowing the attentions of a certain Jack Fergusson, a champion polo player who had come to train my ponies for a match at Delhi. When the match was over, the champion remained. Your mother went for long rides with him on horseback. He was in her apartments oftener than necessary, and at times that even in the West are considered late for a gentleman to visit a lady.

"I did not take exception. Magda had become so charming and so affectionate to me! I looked forward to seeing our sweet hours of love return once again. I was afraid, by ill-timed jealousy, of killing its rebirth. I succeeded so well that in truth it was reborn! . . . Only," added the Maharajah with a laugh that hurt Brinda more than a blow in the face, "it was reborn for somebody else. . . . It was for another that the harvest ripened; your respectable mother ran off with Fergusson, so there was nothing left for me to do but to recall my exiled wives."

"I forbid you! . . ." cried Brinda.

"What? You forbid me from saying what all the palace, all the town, all the world has chattered about?

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That I had been betrayed, abandoned by her in whom I had placed my blind confidence? . . .”

“Alas, no! It is not this statement of fact that I forbid you to make, for it is the truth. But what I do not wish is that you should do it in such an insulting manner. . . .”

“Between you and me, the objection is ridiculous. For where is the insult in the contemptuous language which is so justified in my case? This woman was a nobody; my love had made her a queen, the uncrowned sovereign of my state and of my life. She ought to have been overwhelmed with gratitude, having it in her power to repay my kindness with good nature and submission. But she flouted me, left me for the first comer. Mel Prince of Jahlpore and Delegate of the Chamber of Princes! . . .”

In these last words the Maharajah gave vent to all his resentment. If, with time, his love had died, his pride still suffered, even to-day. On this statement, all pity for him vanished from Brinda's heart. Every throb of filial affection and womanly feeling went out to her mother.

“Who told you that my mother had no excuse? You are a man, you are free, you do not know what the stifling life of the zenana means to an intelligent woman. . . .”

“My mother and before her my grandmother and all the women of our dynasty, like those of all the families of our country, are contented in it, as you yourself will be one day. . . .”

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"Never!"

"Never? . . . What idea is this?" replied the Maharajah with supreme irony. "Since when does a girl say 'never' to her father who has chosen her a husband?"

"It is not true, is it?"

"Certainly, Brinda, you are very slow in grasping things. Don't you understand that it is no more than your duty . . . your interest to submit to the Maharanee? You do not understand to what extent your mother's behaviour has been unpardonable, and you try and make excuses for her; and you do not realize that I have sent for you to marry Prince Keshab Sandral I have educated you entirely with this union in view! The knowledge that I have allowed you to acquire was merely so that you might make use of it when you were married. And now you ask me if I am serious about it! It really makes me wonder if there is any value in the knowledge which you boast to me that your professors have taught you. Have you forgotten what my secretary Karam Sing said to you on my behalf, when he went to fetch you from your school?"

Brinda turned pale at the thought of that interview. It had been, to her, the prelude of so many trials. She made an effort to express her refusal calmly. The voice that came from her lips was absolutely without inflection.

"I have, on the contrary, a very bitter recollection," she said. "The reason that I ask you to repeat it is simply because it seems to me impossible that you should

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seriously think of uniting me to a man I don't even know! "

"You will know him when you marry him. Besides, rest assured, he is a very fine man! His eyes are a little bulgy and his lips a little thick; but he has a kind heart."

"That isn't the point. . . ."

"What is it then? "

"The fact that I have not chosen him."

"The choice of a husband is a man's business! Are you also going to fall into that foolish Western custom of putting your heart first, where it has no business to be? You have a beautiful body, Brinda; that is all that is necessary for the satisfaction of your future husband."

"I am not a slave!" she protested vehemently, for this method of arranging her future revolted her. "I am a free woman, I am not to be sold to the first bidder."

"What are you talking about? You don't seriously imagine that I am making a present of you to Keshab Sandra to be his concubine? It is a very honourable and sacred alliance that is in question, and you know it quite well."

The amazement of the Maharajah was sincere. As Brinda evidently wanted an explanation, he tried to give it to her as completely and as straightforwardly as possible. For monstrous as his action seemed to Brinda, in his eyes the conception of his authority as her father, the supreme director of her life, was perfectly natural.

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"Because it is recognized by your religion, this union would not be any less intolerable," pleaded Brinda, trying to control her feelings of revulsion at the idea.

"To what do you object?"

"To your having arranged it for me without my being consulted. . . ."

"I could not consult you. Haven't I just told you that I arranged it when you were quite unable to give consent . . . you were seven years old."

"But I am no longer that age. To-day I have the right to decide for myself. And I tell you here and now, this marriage will not take place, because it is not my wish! I intend, in spite of everything, to dispose of my own person!"

Whilst she said this her blue eyes flashed with anger. In this young girl fighting for her independence, the Maharajah thought he could see once more the Viennese whom he had loved, violently claiming from him her liberty. The recollection of scenes of bygone days came vividly and unpleasantly to his mind, and Brinda's obstinacy made him lose patience.

His voice became hard:

"You have no right! And this marriage will take place, because it is my wish!" he continued in a voice still more severe. "Because I have said that it will! Because it is in the interest of my kingdom that it shall take place!!! What more flattering alliance, then, have you dreamt of?"

"None," she replied, with tears of despair streaming

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down her cheeks. "All I ask, all I beg is simply do not force me to marry."

"What do you want to do?"

"Remain under your roof."

"You have been so foolish that the patience of the Maharanee is at an end. She cannot put up with you here any longer."

"Then let me go into a convent!"

"What would a girl of your rank and beauty do there? No! I intend by your marriage to assure my posterity and consolidate my throne!"

"Very well, I will marry, but do not insist on this prince."

"Why not?"

"I don't wish to marry a Hindu!"

Brinda was no longer able to hide the true cause of her refusal. The Maharajah pulled himself up to his full height. His lips quivered. His face turned deadly pale. His eyes flamed with hatred.

"So, then, this is the true reason! You don't wish to marry a Hindu! . . . But, you miserable foolish girl, don't you know that the European blood in your veins puts an abominable blemish on you? Ha! you don't wish to marry a Hindu, a prince of a royal house? Why, the poorest Brahmins have the right to show their contempt for you by refusing to prepare your chupatis! When Prince Keshab Sandra, owing to his regard for my ancestors, his friendship for me, his desire of an alliance which would be profitable to us both, is

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ready to forget this misfortune and pay you the honour of raising you to the dignity of a wife, all that you can say in return is: 'I do not wish to marry a Hindu!'"

In his rage, the Maharajah had risen and walked up and down. Crouching like a little animal ready to spring, Brinda faced him. Her gentleness having availed her nothing, she let herself go.

The Maharajah stopped in front of her, gazing at her.

"Do you imagine by any chance that you can marry a European?" he asked her in a sarcastic tone.

"Why not?" she retorted.

He laughed at her cynically for some time.

"You are absolutely mad! Haven't you ever noticed the empty space that is made when we go into their clubs or restaurants? We have great difficulty in being received, we who are the true masters of this country and have been for two thousand years. They have imposed their civilization and you expect to be their equal."

"At Offreville, they treated me as such."

"Out of pity, no doubt, and also the French have no race prejudices. But what Englishman would consent to marry you? Ha! Ha! Poor simple fool . . . Your illusion makes me laugh."

"My mother consented to marry you!"

"It was a miracle of love. Such miracles are very rare. And you see now what disaster it led to! I am sorry to tell you, but like many of her race, your mother was a woman in search of adventure."

"Stop, do you hear?" Brinda commanded, putting

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her hands in front of her to push away the hateful words. "She is my mother and I love her!"

"Your affection is wasted, for your mother hardly appears to return it! During the years since her disappearance she does not seem to have worried much about you. You had better forget her like I do. I wish to wipe out any recollection of her presence here. As for her portrait, this is what I'll do with it."

Then, wrenching the photograph from its frame, he crumpled it and tore it up. Brinda rushed at him with a pitiful cry. It was too late, the torn pieces already lay scattered on the floor.

"As for you, her daughter, my race takes you back. You marry Prince Keshab Sandra! And when your children have reached man's estate, if you are wise and dutiful the blot on your birth will have been forgotten."

"I am proud of being a European!"

"You are not a European!" he protested, more enraged at her last remark than ever.

"Really! Well, look at my eyes. Look at my blue eyes. . . . Think of what you know of my ideas and my character and do you dare to tell me I am not a true Westerner? Why, the very aversion of your family for me . . . and yours also, proves that I am of another race. That is why, very sincerely, I beg you: do not force this Hindu marriage upon me. It cannot be a happy one, because I do not wish it!"

In the fervour of her supplication, and perhaps also to flatter the taste of her father for signs of reverence,

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she threw herself on the ground at his feet; her delicate arms clasped his knees. To hide her offending blue eyes, she bent her head.

Refusing to see how touching a sight she presented, the Maharajah pushed her away.

"Enough of this, Brinda," he said. "Whatever you imagine, whatever you think, you will never be anything but a half-caste in the eyes of white people. And if it is true that my family and myself do not consider you one of us, be doubly thankful that Prince Keshab Sandra deigns to choose you! . . . Don't be alarmed; he knows well enough what respect he owes to the woman he makes his wife. You will have the care that you feel you deserve. . . . I will leave you to think this over, Brinda, and trust you will profit by what I have said. You have in your nature an independence of spirit that you must overcome, for it is no more pleasing to a husband than to a father; and that a husband should have to punish your pride would not be to your liking. Good-bye! . . ."

His voice had such a definite harshness that Brinda did not try to protest. She did not make a movement or attempt to say a word as the Maharajah walked across the large room.

At the doorway he turned and looked at her for a moment. Satisfaction at having broken her resistance lit up his dominating eyes. Quite unmoved, he went out.

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For a long time Brinda lay on the floor overcome with grief. At last tears streamed from her eyes, her body heaved with sobs, giving her relief in her grievous humiliation.

As she came to herself her first action was to collect the pieces of the torn photograph which lay scattered around her on the floor. She picked them up, every one. Then, getting up, she went and sat at her writing-desk, a favourite piece of marquetry furniture that she had managed to bring with her. And, in spite of the tears which blurred her vision, she pieced them together until she re-formed the dear mutilated picture.

Since her unhappy lot had decreed that she would always be a White to Indians and less than an Indian to the Whites, she sought consolation in the picture of her vanished mother as the last refuge that was left to her in the world.

VI

A NEW door, a real prison door, had replaced the ornamental one in Brinda's room, by order of the Maharajah. According to the instructions of the Prince, it remained carefully locked all day, keeping her within four walls, with no other distraction than her own bitter thoughts.

Sometimes, even worse than this solitude, her step-mother sent for her and, assisted by Savitri, Mirra and Parvati, she tried to instruct her into the rules of etiquette that she should know in order to become a perfect Ranee when married to Prince Keshab Sandra.

The Princess had foreseen that Brinda would offer some resistance to this instruction, so she explained to her that her father had given her full power over her, even to allowing her to inflict corporal punishment. In order not to draw upon herself such humiliation, all she could do was to bow to the inevitable. The four women abused their power. With diabolical animosity, they amused themselves under the excuse of training her, of explaining to her with the most hateful intimacy what would be her future as a forced bride.

Brinda left them each time with disgust and indignation. Danah, her faithful nurse, who shared her im-

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prisonment, did not know how to appease her as she sobbed in despair

The remembrance of a mother that she hardly knew was not enough to soothe her. Every day that passed only brought this dreaded marriage nearer. Rather than face the terror of its realization, she would run any risk.

One evening . . . she only went out at the time the Maharanee allowed . . . she was strolling dejectedly in the gardens. Weeks of anxiety had robbed her of her youthful step and had bent her shoulders. She had lost all interest in her appearance, for her Paris dresses had been taken away from her. As she was forced to wear the national costume, she had chosen the first that came, the ugliest, that Parvati had insidiously handed to her: a sari and a dull blue veil, which made her look like a servant.

In truth, this resignation, which delighted her tormentors, had a hidden motive. At night these clothes were not easy to see. Brinda and her servant had often made experiments and found that she became almost invisible at ten yards distance.

Dressed in her poor sari, Brinda walked along the hanging garden. The park, too wooded, too plentiful in hiding-places, was forbidden; but there she was able to wander at will. She walked to the high stone terrace which led to the night-watchmen's beat. Coming to some camellia bushes, Brinda stopped under their shadow. Her veil, drawn over her face, opened just

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enough to allow her to see. Draped in these folds, immovable, she seemed to be part of the massive wall.

The farther she was away from the palace, pink as a huge strawberry ice, the hazier it became in the darkness. As she turned, she could see it no longer. The lighted windows alone showed its position in the expanse of the blue-grey night. Brinda counted them. The third on the left was her room; faithful to her instructions, Danah kept the lights on to make one think that her mistress was there. Brinda knew very well that if she were discovered, it would not be her servant's fault.

If there was any danger, it would be later. At the present moment she was strictly within her rights. Should the officer of the watch see her as he passed, he would say nothing; he would not even suspect anything. It was quite natural that Princess Brinda should choose this corner of the terrace for her meditations. But he did not see her; she herself already could no longer distinguish the bottom of her dress, nor her hands, held out in front of her.

There were visiting rounds at all hours. Brinda had calculated before coming that she would just have time to hide herself before the tenth round in the evening. Though she had no means of controlling the flight of time, she knew when he would be there. The immobility that she exercised was beginning to make her ache when she saw lights moving in the night. To the soft sound

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of sandalled feet and a rattle of arms; the guard advanced under the command of an officer.

In spite of the certainty she had that she would not be noticed by them, her heart beat so loudly that she seriously thought they might hear it. The soldiers were in front of her. . . . They had passed! As they disappeared her heart quietened down. She waited till she could not hear them before she left her hiding-place. Then she ran to the edge of the terrace. From there she could overlook the plain.

The wall was covered with banyan trees. On tip-toe, she caught hold of a large branch, then, using the lower branches as a ladder, she descended, without much difficulty, the three yards drop to the ground.

A dash across the open brought her into the shadow of some large trees. From there she went forward with care. Not from the fear of any wild animal. She knew that she would have to go ten or twelve miles from Jablpore before she ran much risk of that. But her feet were bare in her sandals and she might step on a snake asleep in the grass.

This risk did not stop her. She made direct for a little bungalow built on the outskirts of the village of Nawarhatta. She had been there so often that she could find her way in the dark.

The wood ended abruptly; Brinda was again in the open. With her hands in front of her like a blind woman, she touched some farm tools, left just where work had stopped that evening. She knew by this that

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she was near the farms. She went on again. Suddenly, when she thought she had lost her way and was looking for some landmark, the shape of the white bungalow stood out in front of her not twenty yards away.

She ran the last few yards. Almost falling down at the entrance, she rapped loudly on the screen which served as a door. Softly she murmured:

"Father! Father! Let me in!"

Immediately there was a sound of someone moving in the house. Footsteps could be heard coming towards the door.

"Oh, poor child!" said a soft voice.

A tall white figure bent over Brinda, bringing into view a large black wooden crucifix whose arms stretched out on the wall seemed ready to receive her.

Two strong hands seized her wrists and helped her to rise. She went into the house, overcome with emotion and fatigue. Only able to weep, she let herself fall on her knees on the rice-straw matting near a rough seat that Father Forestier had just left to come to her.

With his large clear eyes full of pity, the old missionary put his hands on her head, bowed down with sorrow.

"Weep, dear child," he said. "Then you can tell me your troubles and we will see what we can do!"

Brinda nodded in acquiescence. She had absolute confidence in the power and goodness of this man whom she had come to see.

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What had he not done, this Father Forestier, in the thirty years since he came from the Monastery of Carthage? He had won the goodwill of the Maharajah whom successive deaths had placed on the throne at an early age, and little by little he had also gained his esteem and admiration.

If he had wished, he could have stayed at the palace as special adviser to the Prince; but in his district there was too much distress, too much suffering, both mental and physical, which needed his help and attention for him to accept what he looked upon as a "soft job." Armed with authority from the Maharajah, he went through the jungle, across open country, stopping at the villages and giving assistance to the untouchables. His medical knowledge had been of enormous help to the sudras who tried to cure themselves by means of fetish and incantation. His great heart had found words that consoled and comforted them. Although he spoke Hindustani like a native, he preached very little; the religious meaning of his words would not have been understood, but his actions spoke volumes. His fame was renowned; in various ways it preceded him into the villages. When he arrived, the villagers were at their doors ready to welcome "the gentle man" as they called him.

Father Forestier was without pride. The homage that they paid him was given to the Merciful Father for the love of whom he worked.

The years passed. After a quarter of a century,

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prematurely aged, he had come to retire in the village of Nawarhatta, near the Maharajah's palace. Even there his benevolent work still went on. Younger men than he continued the arduous missionary work, but the recollection of him still remained wherever he had ministered. Many a traveller went out of his way to come and pay their respects to their brother in Jesus Christ. From them he knew something of what was happening in the Province; through him people at a distance could be helped and protected. All kinds of sufferers came to him. His name had given Brinda a ray of hope in her distress.

"Father," she said, as soon as she could speak, "Father, are we alone?"

When she had been reassured, she threw back the veil which hid her face. Speaking no longer in Hindustani, which she had been using in order not to excite suspicion as to her personality, she begged him in French:

"Father, help me!"

"Princess!" he exclaimed in surprise as he recognized her. "Are you really in such distress? What can I do for you that your family cannot do?"

"Alas! it is owing to the tyranny of my family that I have come to ask your help. Oh, I know quite well that you would not wish to encourage a daughter to revolt against the just authority of her own people. But I am not a rebellious child. . . . I am an unfortunate child! My stepmother dislikes me! I see that

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does not surprise you. . . . But the Maharajah shares her views. Oh, yes! He has said so himself," Brinda added, seeing that the Father gave a gesture of astonishment. "You know whose daughter I am?"

"Yes," he replied with a nod of the head.

"You know also all about my parents' separation?"

Again he nodded.

"Ah, Father!" she pleaded. "She was not in fault, don't despise her!"

"I should never blame anyone without having heard their side of the story, much less despise them."

"The Maharajah has vented his resentment on me, because he cannot forgive my mother. . . . However, I assure you, Father, there are many excuses to be found for her! Perhaps being a Hindu he cannot see them. Perhaps for women brought up in the zenana and who for centuries have been trained to this existence—a life of seclusion, rivalry, spying, suspicion and treachery of all sorts—such a life is bearable, and perhaps, as they have never known any other, it may even be pleasant. I have been shut up there for three months since I returned, so I can imagine how great must have been my mother's moral annihilation in that atmosphere at the end of five years. So I forgive her. I understand, no matter what the consequences were, how necessary it was for her to escape from this life. It is true that she came to the palace of her own free will! But who is there who does not make a mistake? Warned by her example, I do not wish to be forced into a similar

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position. Do you know that the Maharajah wishes me to marry Prince Keshab Sandra?"

"He is a Hindu of high caste," remarked Father Forestier in an undertone, waiting for Brinda to open her heart more fully before formulating a definite opinion.

"I should prefer him if he were of more humble birth. He might not perhaps have that insufferable pride which leads my father and many princes to imagine that they are descendants of the gods. I should be his slave. The little place that I should hold in his affection I should share with others. I should only keep in his good graces so long as I satisfied his pleasure. In order not to be ousted by my rivals I should have to pander to his caprices, and even to his vices, by God knows what abject degradations. Oh, I have been well informed, as you see! My stepmother and my father's other wives have taken care of that!"

With a heavy sigh she hid her face in her hands.

"I don't know," the Father replied, "what terrible debauches your stepmother has invented in order to poison your mind. I know, however, Hindu palaces where life is patriarchal and pleasant. . . ."

"Surely you also don't wish to force the marriage upon me!" she cried out in despair.

"Don't be alarmed. I have no desire to do that. I realize too well how repulsive it is to you."

"Why, how could it be otherwise? My mother's race is predominant in me. I am a European, brought

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up as a European, by Europeans! I have their tastes . . . their scruples . . . their prejudices, if you like! In short, I understand life as they do. I follow the same ideals, I bow to the same laws."

"Does the Maharajah know your aversion to this proposal?"

"He laughs at it, Father, and he says that he will overcome it! But I tell you plainly that I prefer death to being forced into this odious union!"

The Father made a gesture in protestation.

"Of course," she added hastily, "I would only do anything like that as a last resource. I have thought of another way out: to run away to escape from my father's dominion, reach Calcutta and sail for Europe. They have not forgotten me at Offreville, I am sure. I shall find friends there and some employment. I shall be able to live peacefully and happily, if you will help me; for you will help me, won't you?"

"Before embarking on anything like that, have you thought, my poor child, of what you are giving up: your name, your rank, your fortune? For your father will disown you."

"My freedom is worth more to me than all that!"

"Have you considered," he continued, "all the dangers and the fatigue of the journey? You will have to hide, live like a hunted animal, rely on people's help and risk foul play."

"Your name, Father, and your protection will enable me to overcome all those difficulties!"

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"And in Europe? Do you think you are only going to come across straight and honourable folk? The base meannesses, trickeries of the zenana disgust you; believe me, you will find that a handsome girl like you, alone and without money, will run far greater risks."

"In that case, as I am a Christian, there are convents where God cares for girls who are unhappy. I will enter one. I have already suggested it to the Maharajah, but he would not hear of it!"

"God is not so cruel, my dear child," he replied with a smile. "If one day you become His servant, it would not be because you have not had the opportunity of leading a life more suited to your wishes. I think, as you do, that you will find friends in Europe ready to help you. To make more certain of this, I will write to some people I know over there who will look after you for my sake."

"The first thing to do is to take you to Rajmahal, the headquarters of the Mission. I often drive over there. I will see that suspicions are not aroused, at any rate until you are at sea; for then it will not matter very much if I admit that I have helped you. Now go and have a rest; we will start to-morrow at dawn."

"Oh, Father, please do this for me; let us start at once! Don't wait. Every minute I am in danger. Think! If I were caught!"

"Keep calm, my child!" he said, moved by her alarm. "I will do as you wish. Just give me time to

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get my conveyance ready. Stay here quietly and wait for me."

Saying this, he went out, taking a lantern with him, hiding the light of it under his coat.

Awakened by friendly pats on his haunches, his mule quietly allowed itself to be harnessed. Just at that moment Father Forestier thought he heard a creaking noise behind the shed. For an instant he paused, listening intently; but everything was so quiet, serene and peaceful that he thought it must have been a rat. He went on with his task. Suddenly, as he was fastening the last straps, a bantering voice called out:

"Good evening, Sahib! Are you starting on a journey?"

The Father, seemingly quite unperturbed, turned round in a leisurely fashion. One of the Maharajah's officers stood at the door with his men.

"Oh, dear," he replied quietly, "as you see . . ."

"It is very late!"

"Oh, no! At my age I find it less tiring to travel at night and in the early hours of the morning."

"Quite so, Sahib. But in this instance, Sahib, you will have to put it off."

"I am sorry. But I have business to do. I don't see why . . ."

"I only know that His Highness the Maharajah has ordered it so. And would you also be good enough," he added, seeing that the Father was considering what action he should take, "to tell the Princess Brinda . . ."

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"Excuse me, but why are you giving me a message for the Princess?"

"Because she is here in your house. She was seen going in. One of the Maharanee's faithful servants followed her, went back to the palace and said that she was hiding in your house."

"The Princess is in my house, I admit it, but she is perfectly safe there. She wishes to stay here and will do so."

"I think, Sahib, that you do not quite understand me," said the police officer dryly. "You cannot have heard, or perhaps your mind is pre-occupied. The Maharajah has commanded me to bring his daughter back. He is not concerned as to whether she wishes to come with me or not."

"I quite understand you," replied the Father quietly. "I am only anxious that you on your part should understand me. I object to your taking away the Princess!"

"I should not have thought that an old man would have acted so foolishly," said the officer, pushing aside the Father, who was trying to bar the way. How futile for a man of your age to try and force his will upon ten young men whom His Highness the Maharajah has armed! "Guards, arrest the missionary whilst I search the bungalow."

"There is no need. I shall not resist!" With a haughty air, Brinda appeared at the door of the house. "Guards, release Father Forestier at once. You know the esteem in which he is held by your Prince. He

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will never forgive you if you ill-treat him. Good-bye, Father," she added with a half-smothered sob. "Your kindness has been a great comfort to me."

Then, refusing the officer's professed assistance, she got into the closed palanquin, which held her prisoner.

It was still night when the fugitive returned to her room. But Danah was not there to comfort her. The only living being who loved her had disappeared, and along with her, all the furniture and knick-knacks which reminded her of her stay in France.

As dawn broke, Brinda, worn out with fatigue, slept at last. In the silence of this wing of the palace the only sound was the pacing of the guards' felt-covered shoes in the corridor.

VII

AFTER dinner, the Maharajah's guests—this evening there were not many—retired into the smoking-room, decorated with innumerable hunting trophies.

There had been no women, not even a white one, at dinner. The party had consisted of one of the Ministers, his secretary, an English engineer in charge of the water supply, an envoy of Prince Keshab Sandra and two important officials from the Residency in Calcutta. The honour of being seated opposite the Prince had been given, as usual, to the representative of the Viceroy, the Political Agent of the State of Jahlpore—Captain Ronald Armstrong. This young officer, in spite of his important position, seemed very bored.

Instead of mixing with the guests as they smoked their cigars, he had wandered alone out on to the terrace which gave upon the gardens wrapped in darkness.

There, leaning against the pink marble balustrade, he contemplated the splendour of this tropical night. All the phrases which passed through his mind to describe it were quite unworthy of the spectacle spread out

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before him. Those shadowy forms over there, were they really trees? Were they not great masses of velvet bathed in brilliant moonlight? And the sky! He remembered having seen the same rich colour one day, when quite a small boy he had taken a polished sapphire from his mother's finger, had held it up to the light and had looked through it. This remembrance took him back to England and his boyhood. Instead of the luxuriance of the East that he had before him, he substituted the gentle, undulating Kentish hills on a summer's evening. That comfortable country home with flowers peeping into every window, where his parents and his sisters lived. On the closely cut lawns, he had rolled and scampered, longing to grow a big man. Need he have become a captain so soon and have had to kick his heels at the court of this nabob, civilized and yet not civilized, who would never be either an enemy or an ally of any value to Britain? He sighed as these thoughts passed through his mind.

"You seem pensive, Captain Armstrong," said a soft voice behind his shoulder.

He turned round, putting his hand to his forehead. With the far-away expression of a man who is just waking up, he looked at the Maharajah's Minister and confidential adviser. In a friendly and insinuating manner he pretended to be interested in him from pure good-heartedness. To collect his thoughts he replied, smiling:

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"Oh, no! I was admiring this lovely night . . . that was all."

"You admire it, as you do all the country. And yet you long to get away from it! . . ."

Armstrong made a gesture of protest.

"It is useless for you to say otherwise. We know that you have taken steps to request the Viceroy to send you on active service."

"Who told you? "

The Maharajah's Minister in an apologetic manner replied:

"We know everything. . . . It is our business to do so, isn't it, captain? And it is very essential. As, for example, in your case. If we had not been warned, we most certainly should not have been able to put things right. . . . That would have been a great pity, because His Highness appreciates your collaboration very highly and would be grieved to see you leave us."

Armstrong bowed. He tried to find a fitting reply to the compliment. But his honesty overcame his desire to be courteous.

"The fact is, I am bored here," he replied.

"What can we do to amuse you?" he inquired quickly, scrutinizing the captain's face, for his mind seemed to be far away where the State affairs of Jahlpore and the petty intrigues of its Court were of no importance. "Is there nothing we can do that would please you? "

"Nothing, alas, my dear Minister. . . . I need an

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active life. That is why I have written to Delhi. Rebels are busy on the Afghan frontier. The Waziris are anxious for a scrap. I have asked to be transferred there, especially as my great friend, Captain Warren, is in command of the Tochi Scouts at Miransha."

That was not the sort of reply the Hindu expected. Feeling that he was not making any headway, he tried to gain time for his plans to mature.

"Listen, captain. May I flatter myself into believing that everything here has been done to please and satisfy you? "

"Certainly! " replied Armstrong, glad to find something pleasant to say without compromising his chances of independence. "I have greatly appreciated His Highness's attitude towards me. I shall never forget his consideration and thoughtfulness. . . ."

"May I hope that you have not been influenced in the idea of leaving us by anybody's behaviour here? "

"I repeat, my dear Minister, that I have absolutely nothing to complain of."

"I believe you. If it were otherwise, you would be wrong to hide it from me, for I would make anybody who had annoyed you, suffer as he deserves. I would even make it a personal matter."

"I assure you that, since I have been at Jahlpore, I have always received every courtesy."

"Well, Captain Armstrong," he concluded, "as you have pleasant memories of your stay here, wouldn't you

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like to know how you can best show your appreciation? I did not say, of course, 'pay in return for our good services.' Anything we have done has been done simply to please you. If we have succeeded, we are well repaid. But if on your part you are able to do us a service, you would not refuse, I am sure."

"What do you mean?" said Armstrong, who was wondering what it was all about.

"Wait a month before taking an irrevocable step."

The captain made a movement which meant: "Is that all?"

"It is a small matter, as you yourself see," remarked the Hindu, who understood the gesture. "That will give me time to try to accustom His Highness to the sorrowful idea of losing you."

"I am afraid," Armstrong replied, smiling, "that you are over-estimating the price that His Highness puts upon my presence; but if you think that a month will obliterate his sense of loss, how can I refuse this gesture of good feeling towards your master? I will wait a month before I make it clear to the authorities at Delhi exactly what I want."

"Thank you, captain," replied the Minister, concealing his delight. "But are you going to keep away from us all the evening? Won't you come and have a game of billiards with Mr. Wingate?"

Armstrong refused the invitation. His mail to England which had to be written was the excuse he

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made for leaving at once and saying good night to the Maharajah.

The Minister followed him, and when the Maharajah, a little worried, tried to persuade him to stay, he was able to give a sly wink, intimating that what they wanted had been obtained.

Armstrong left, but the reception went on till a late hour. The Maharajah and his Minister kept things going. The scheme in which he wanted to make use of Armstrong and for which reason his Minister had tried to keep him, was not the only thing that occupied the Prince's mind. There were, alas! many State affairs; differences of opinion and difficulties that needed his personal attention. These were his daily tasks. Brinda to-night had imposed upon him her unshaken determination not to agree to the marriage that he had arranged for her. She had refused to accept the presents that her future husband had sent.

In the name of his master, Prince Keshab Sandra's representative had expressed himself highly displeased at her attitude. And while cursing the intractability of his daughter, the Maharajah had been compelled, as a matter of courtesy and friendliness, to make excuses for the behaviour of the future bride and pretend that it meant nothing.

By the time the representative had retired along with the other guests, the disastrous effects of Brinda's behaviour had been blotted out, but the Maharajah still resented it. His anger vented itself on the one who

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least deserved it: his Minister had to bear the brunt of it all. But pleased with the result of his interview with Captain Armstrong, he went to his master's apartments to report the State affairs.

" Ah! You here—you! " exclaimed the Maharajah. " Well, you can boast of having about as much sense as a dead jackal! "

" Pardon! " stammered the Minister, disconcerted. " I have not quite explained matters."

" What haven't you explained? The day you explain anything intelligently, I shall be greatly surprised! "

" In what way have I displeased Your Highness? "

" Surely this stupid reception, at which Armstrong was bored, is enough to make me angry! Why have you had these dancers again who no longer amuse our Political Agent? "

" But," said the Minister with natural surprise, " wasn't it Your Highness himself who . . . "

" Well, let the dancers go," cut in the Maharajah. " Am I responsible for the fact that Armstrong went away when nobody else had thought of leaving? "

" If Your Highness will only wait to hear me out, you will be able to judge of my stupidity! " replied the Minister, with so much triumph under his mock modesty that the Maharajah exclaimed:

" Have you got something out of him? "

Giving full details and being careful to bring out the points that showed his cleverness, the Minister repeated his conversation with Captain Armstrong.

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"It is not much, but it is important," he said in conclusion. "All depends on how we make use of this month's delay."

"You know quite well," grumbled the Maharajah, whose ill-temper was not yet appeased, "that we cannot realize our projects in a month."

"But when I speak of making use of the month," retorted the Minister, "I mean by trying to change it into a much longer period."

"That is more sensible! So keep in mind that if I want Armstrong I want him for a long time. He is the best Political Agent we have had. I rely on him absolutely to carry out the negotiations with Sir Edward regarding the Goalpara irrigation canal."

"Your Highness is a good judge of character. He is, in fact, a most intelligent and courteous man. . . . The pity is that he is bored here."

"Here? This evening. . . . At my house? It is because your interlude during dinner was stupid! "

"Pardon, Your Highness, I should have said that he is bored by being in your State! " added the Minister hurriedly, without referring to the person responsible for the evening's programme. "Captain Armstrong finds us too quiet. He prefers to be on the Afghan frontier where there are rebels."

"What! " said the Maharajah, raising his hands. "I can't, at any rate, foment a revolution in order to keep him here! I find this young Armstrong too exacting! If he is fond of violent amusements, have you

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thought of arranging some big game hunting for him?"

"Yes, Your Highness, I have done so. I have arranged a hunt especially for him, anticipating in advance his wishes!"

"Perhaps that is where you made a mistake. A satisfied desire is like a dead butterfly. And sport? Armstrong is of a nationality in which sport is a favourite amusement."

"I have tried that as well, Your Highness. But either the captain has not met any competitors good enough to play with, or else, different from his fellow-countrymen, he does not care very much for sport, for he does not seem to find more pleasure in it than in hunting, and he has given me to understand that he would be much obliged if I did not ask him again to play tennis with duffers, or polo with a team that was beaten last spring by the Maharajah of Kashmer's."

"Well, when he is not working, what does he do?"

"He goes out riding, Your Highness."

"With some particular object in view? Is he fond of archæology?"

"No, just haphazard rides as his fancy takes him. . . ."

"Sentimental outings, perhaps?"

"I don't think so, Your Highness. At least, not in the sense that you mean. If his rides have any sentimentality about them, it is nothing concrete—past regrets . . . or maybe . . . longings for the future."

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"It is this desire for a change which has got hold of him. Really this young fellow rather annoys me. European bachelors are a pest to Indians. They are never satisfied either with their club or their friends' wives. But we can find a means of keeping him here."

"How, if I may be so bold as to ask?" the Minister inquired.

"Why, by a woman of course! A real woman."

"But he is an Englishman!" protested the Minister.

"And so?" retorted the Maharajah with a broad grin. "Do you think he is less of a man on that account? You are still labouring under a delusion regarding the virtue of the English? It is a rumour that they spread abroad for their hypocritical propaganda. . . . I know what they are like. . . . Do you remember that tea-planter who pretended to live like an ascetic on his lonely plantation, but every quarter used to buy a young native about fourteen years old and then send her back to her parents with a handful of rupees as a recompense? . . . No! No! Don't talk to me about the virtue of Europeans when they are in Asia!"

"Your Highness is, without question, quite right. . . . But as regards Armstrong . . ."

"The thing is to look out carefully for a woman that we can throw across his path."

"Why . . ." said the Minister, surprised, "has Your Highness an idea of some particular person who you . . ."

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"She must be found . . ." the Maharajah cut in.
"Let me think for a moment."

The Minister bowed and waited in respectful silence while his master thought out a subtle scheme.

"What is the date to-day?" he asked.

"February the 7th. . . ."

"Good. Find out at once if Señorita Concha Guerrero has arrived at Calcutta as I fancy she has!"

"I will find out. Does Your Highness think that she would consent? . . ."

"Would consent! It is obvious you don't know her! Why, Concha Guerrero is made for intrigue. She breathes for that, and I dare add—she lives for that! I am sure of it. I knew all about her two years ago in London, where, in order to console herself for conjugal dissensions, she made a dead set at me. She had not time to gain her victory! A few days longer and I believe I should have let myself be won over. She possesses all the qualities we want—experienced, audacious, a grand dame—at least in appearance. I don't see how a man as young as Armstrong would have the strength to resist her. As soon as you find out that she is in Calcutta, invite her, on my behalf, to come and stay at the palace as long as she likes. She can only have the pleasantest recollections and the greatest hopes regarding our acquaintance. At a word from me she will come at once! . . . Wait, that is not all. You will not go yourself to Calcutta. You must depute Kumbha Sing. You are too ugly, my dear Minister. You would

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frighten anything! . . . Kumbha Sing is handsome. . . . He speaks well. . . . He will have no difficulty in bringing this beautiful creature who has charm to the very ends of her pointed nails and will lasso Armstrong like a Californian vamp! ”

VIII

THE Maharajah had not made a mistake. From one of the finest French liners, the *Felix-Roussel*, of the Messageries Maritimes, the beautiful Concha Guerrero had disembarked at Colombo. She was the ex-wife of Mitchell Smith, a banker, and after her divorce she had resumed her theatrical name and was well known in the night-clubs of London and New York. From Colombo she had gone to Calcutta and was stopping at an hotel there.

As soon as this news had been confirmed by the Maharajah's police, he sent his aide-de-camp, Captain Kumbha Sing, to Calcutta. He was entrusted with the pleasant task of inviting Señorita Guerrero to accompany him to the palace of Jahlpore, where the Maharajah, his master, hoped she would come and stay.

The Prince was right in selecting Kumbha for this delicate mission, for he was clever—an expert in such matters, carrying them out with great diplomacy.

As he had been told to spare no expense in order to ensure the success of his enterprise, he had begun by arranging a suitable setting.

He made quite a sensation in Calcutta when he alighted from the white Rolls Royce car, decorated with

the Maharajah's arms, wearing a dazzling white satin tunic.

At the hotel that Concha honoured with her presence everyone quickly realized the object of his visit. She was at once informed. She did not even bother to finish dressing before she asked the dazzling aide-de-camp to come up to her private sitting-room. True, she had often been told that she never looked more charming than when she was in a negligé, so she would have been foolish not to believe it. He showered upon her a thousand compliments, and he told her half a dozen times that it was her dear friend the reigning prince of Jahlpore who wished to see her. She became so embarrassed that she hid her face with her hand, but forgot to blush.

"Captain, I am overcome. And in my delight at receiving you I have forgotten that I am not properly dressed!"

"Oh! Mademoiselle!" protested the aide-de-camp.

"Yes, really! . . . Look, I have hardly anything on under this kimono!"

And so that the handsome Hindu, if he was not quite assured on the point, should not continue to have any doubt about it, she threw open her blue silk kimono, displaying charming transparent lingerie. She was then gracious enough not to close it again completely, so that, thanks to the excuse that she had just given, she remained slightly more undressed than before.

Kumbha Sing smilingly acknowledged his apprecia-

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tion, but remaining perfectly motionless, he showed he knew how to keep his place.

Delighted by his courteous behaviour, Concha came and sat close to him to explain to him under what fortunate circumstances she had met the Maharajah, and even went on to tell him her entire past life.

With infinite patience he listened to her story. From early youth he had been told that ladies' chatter was of no consequence. A dictum that he found very true to-day. While this European bothered to retell these details merely to please herself, he just allowed himself to be soothed by the harmonious cadences of her words, for Concha had a very pleasing voice.

Rather than follow her fantastic narrative, he preferred merely to gaze at her.

She was squatting, rather than sitting, on the cushions of the divan, her legs tucked under her body. Her tiny foot, in its fancy slipper, which had the playful trick of tapping its sole against the heel of its fellow, attracted Kumbha's attention. He took this opportunity of admiring the graceful shape of her leg in its thin silk stocking. Above, the blue kimono showed clearly the mould of her figure, and the aide-de-camp had no reason to find fault with its perfection. The face completed this seductive ensemble. The eyes were beautiful. The complexion radiant with make-up or health. The mouth a little weary-looking, perhaps, but very voluptuous. And with such perfect eyebrows one could forgive the nose being a little too thick.

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"I am already thirty," murmured Concha with a merry twinkle. . . . "I am an old woman, according to Indian ideas, captain!"

"Oh, mademoiselle! . . . You know in your country you have the secret of eternal youth."

Although he had certain ideas upon the subject, Kumbha did not know definitely whether the Maharajah had any personal interest in Concha Guerrero; but as she appeared to him—and he had a very favourable opportunity of judging—he could certainly congratulate his master. She was really a very charming person!

She had finished the story of her infancy in Cuba, where even at that time she was persecuted by the attentions of every man who saw her.

"Yes, captain! They were all after me. So I came to the conclusion that my figure was not so bad, and therefore it was my duty to allow all lovers of art to benefit by my beauty."

"That was a very gracious way of looking at it, mademoiselle."

"Then I danced in a music-hall, very scantily clad, as is the custom in Europe. My last admirer, Mitchell Smith, saw me there. The same evening he sent me a bouquet of a hundred orchids and a diamond of thirty carats. I put the flowers in a vase and the diamond on my finger. He married me. But he was only a middle-class person with a middle-class mind. He insisted that I must only exhibit my figure to him."

"He was not a man of good taste."

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"No, captain. He was an old bear who deserved nothing better than a slattern of a woman with a moustache. I told him so one day when he overstepped the mark. He made a scene in front of everybody at the Ritz in New York. I was enraged. I undressed myself during dessert and threw my gown at the *maitre d'hôtel*. It was a terrible scandal. They wrapped me in a tablecloth, and my husband, as red as a lobster, left the place under a fire of jokes from the men, delighted at getting a free entertainment. The next day all the American newspapers spoke of the Venus of the Ritz. . . . That was me."

She stopped for a moment to see the effect of her remarks, then she continued:

"My dear captain, if you only knew how I suffered at the hands of this vulgar, stingy man! He treated me with inconceivable niggardliness. I could give you figures that you would not credit. . . ."

Poor Concha! She had good reason to complain on that score. After a divorce obtained against her in a very high-handed manner, the banker allowed her a paltry pittance. She bemoaned her lot.

"Yes, captain! Five hundred dollars a month. Fancy having to come down to artificial silk stockings and having to wait for the sales at the leading dressmakers. Fortunately, Mitchell Smith has been punished!"

"Did you kill him?"

"No. He married a Hollywood star who allowed

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him to come to her house for week-ends as a country cousin, and deceived him with her camera-man. He is made to look still more foolish than he was when he was with me! But don't let's talk of the old pachyderm!

"May the vultures devour him as soon as possible!"

"That's right! Sure."

"Was it in London that you met His Highness?"

"Yes, one evening at Ciro's."

"After your divorce?"

"No. Before. . . . The Maharajah had noticed me one gala night. Everyone was tight. . . . I dipped my garter in his glass of champagne. . . . His Highness emptied the glass, and smiling, asked for a little more."

"To drink?"

"No. To see me take off my other garter. That annoyed my husband. I was delighted."

"Did you put anything else in His Highness's glass?"

"Yes. My lips."

"Oh! And your husband?"

"He went home to bed. We finished six bottles, the Maharajah, his friends and myself. . . ."

"A charming evening."

"Oh, yes! . . . He was splendid. You see, he understood me! If he had been there when I was divorced, he would, I am sure, have helped me out of all sorts of difficulties. They were so unkind to me. It is amazing

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to see how people attack a poor helpless woman! The Maharajah was far away, unfortunately . . . alas! He at once wrote me a most touching letter. I assure you I shall never forget it. It is not often one finds a friend like that. . . . And now what a kind thought to let me have news of him! ”

“His Highness has done more, mademoiselle,” said the aide-de-camp, bowing towards her, which gave him from above a better view of Concha’s figure. . . . “He is very anxious to see you again, and now that I have the good fortune to be able to appreciate your charms, I understand his desire! ”

But the young man was wasting his time with his gallantries. Concha Guerrero did not intend to allow herself to be caught by this little aide-de-camp instead of a nabob who might become such a satisfactory protector. She drew back quickly, exclaiming:

“My God! Is His Highness in Calcutta? ”

“Rest assured, mademoiselle! I should not have left you in ignorance of the fact. If His Highness were in Calcutta, I should have told you at once.”

The aide-de-camp with insolent audacity approached nearer to her, patted her knees and began to flatter her, as if this caress was the most natural thing in the world.

“But His Highness is coming? ”

“No, mademoiselle. To his great regret His Highness is not able to undertake the journey. His official duties keep him at home.”

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"But then . . . where can I meet His Highness?"

"At his palace at Jahlpore, where it will give him immense pleasure if you will come and stay as long as you wish. May I hope that you will deign to accept?"

"Certainly!" she replied without the slightest hesitation, only too pleased to accept, as it would relieve her of all anxiety regarding her daily expenses, and would give her the chance of further perquisites.

"When does the Maharajah expect me to come?"

"At once, mademoiselle, if you can manage it. The Maharajah has sent me as his ambassador to bring you the invitation, to see that you have all you require and have no worries as to undertaking the journey, and proper protection on the way there. He would have liked to have come himself to fetch you had it been possible! I hope I shall be able to prove myself worthy of the task which covers me with both honour and delight."

"The Maharajah means that you are to represent him entirely?" she inquired with a mischievous look that did not escape the notice of the aide-de-camp, for he immediately seized her hand and kissed it, murmuring:

"Yes, mademoiselle, in every way, his second self."

"Now that is very thoughtful of him," she said, abandoning her other hand instead of withdrawing the first, as the value of the thought passed through her mind. Consequently it was not common sense to dis-

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courage devotions that were offered. "I am deeply touched by the Maharajah's kindness. As he has put you at my disposal, will you take me out to lunch somewhere? I cannot bear the sight of packing! The chamber-maid will do all that in my absence! Ah! I forgot. . . . My hotel bill must be paid."

"I beg you will allow me to see to that."

"And, oh yes, I have some purchases to make."

"His Highness will pay for those."

"And also the manager has lent me two thousand five hundred rupees."

"His Highness will be pleased to pay the manager for you."

"You know, really, His Highness spoils me. . . . Wait for me a moment . . . two or three minutes, that's all!"

The three minutes lasted three-quarters of an hour. She returned looking quite as attractive in her pearl grey tailor-made costume. The settling of the bill and the repayment of the rupees gave her infinite pleasure. Playfully she tapped the aide-de-camp on the cheek, and as she opened her door remarked:

"And now, my dear captain . . . to the Quest of the Golden Fleece!"

In a dream Concha Guerrero sped along the white roads in the white Rolls Royce accompanied by the young man also in white.

"Five hours to travel two hundred and forty miles

is enough; we shall be there in six hours," the aide-de-camp had remarked as he got into the car, as though the road were a racing-track reserved for him alone.

At terrifying speed the chauffeur sped over plain and through forest. Glimpses of scenery possibly charming and in any case new flashed by without Concha being able to get more than a confused idea of masses and colours. That was no loss to her. Her imagination and her mind was occupied with other interesting prospects more to her taste than the beautiful views of Bengal. She pictured herself the favourite of this wealthy prince whose magnificence had already attracted her in London. For what other reason had she come to Calcutta except to meet him? Besides, to rectify what the age of the grand seigneur might render wearisome to the adventure, she could hope for the more sprightly attentions of the handsome young aide-de-camp dressed in satin, like the prince charming of a fairy-tale. Yes, indeed, for a woman of Concha's nature it would be difficult to think of a more attractive outlook.

Suddenly her travelling companion touched her arm.

"Those palms you see across the plain there are trees in His Highness's park."

"But it is quite a forest!"

"Merely a wood, at least in our country. Everything with us is of tropical luxuriance; our gardens are woods and our forests are worlds; we live in palaces as large

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as temples; as to our temples . . . they are cities! And everything is in keeping—things and men.”

“You are modest!” Concha replied banteringly.

“In the West it is only the women, you know,” he said, kissing her hand, “whose superiority we are obliged to acknowledge.”

As soon as the car entered the park, it slackened its pace.

Enormous pepper trees and pipal figs formed the avenue along which they went; an emerald road of imposing grandeur which suddenly came to an end where lawns ornamented with massive carved vases at the edges of tiny streams lay before them. Clumps of choice scented trees every now and then blocked the view of the immense garden, and in the background stood the splendid rose-tinted palace.

“Good heavens!” exclaimed Concha. “Is that the Maharajah’s palace?”

“Yes, mademoiselle! It is the palace of His Highness, your host and admirer.”

Concha looked at the handsome Hindu and murmured timidly:

“You will at least be prudent!”

The aide-de-camp shrugged his shoulders and appeared not to understand.

“Prudent? Why? I am deputed to take the Maharajah’s place. I have done my best. Now that you have arrived at his house, he will be able to look after you himself. My duties terminate at the door of this

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bungalow, which His Highness begs that you will look upon as your own. So all I have to do, mademoiselle, is to offer you my humble respects! ”

Dumbfounded, Concha stared at the young man as he stood beside the car delivering his little speech. Obviously there was only one thing he expected from her: that she would get out of the car and follow her trunks, which had already been taken into the house.

“My dear, I shall remember you!” she muttered between her teeth, furious with anger.

Jumping out on to the sanded path, she entered the house. A picked staff of servants awaited her in the hall and bowed low as she passed. A turbaned *khidmutgar* handed her a letter on a beautifully filigreed brass tray.

Such manifest deference appeased the blow that the proud insolence of the aide-de-camp had dealt to her pride. Concha smiled as she took up the envelope. She was delighted when she read the contents of the note. It was an invitation from the Maharajah to come and have tea with him as soon as she could.

So whilst some of the servants unpacked her luggage and others prepared an aromatic bath, Concha, with the seriousness of a general detailing his troops for a pitched battle, laid out on her dressing-table the numerous bottles and jars of pomade by means of which a considerable part of her beauty was obtained.

Suddenly she uttered a cry of terror. Someone had come into her room behind her and was rummaging in

IX

BATHED, massaged, perfumed and made-up, Concha Guerrero was admiring herself in all her splendour. There remained one question to settle. The most important of all—the dress that it was advisable to wear.

Being an accomplished man-hunter, she studied the question, not from the point of view of the cut or the colour, but from the thickness of the fabric. Ought she to be dressed in a web-like voile, very *décolleté* and short—exquisitely short—sleeves that without much trouble or skill allowed her to show off or to conceal the attractive curve of her shoulders or the other more alluring ones of her bosom? This little game of hide-and-seek rarely failed to have its effect. However, Concha Guerrero, having plenty of time before her to inveigle the Prince to surrender, thought it would perhaps be more satisfactory to go by easy stages than to overwhelm him suddenly with an almost total display of her charms.

In that case a high-necked dress would be wise. Yes, but the Maharajah was of an age when one enjoys

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immediate realizations. Concha meditated. Concha hesitated.

At length she decided on a clever compromise—a dress of *crêpe ondulé* covering the arms to the wrist, winding round the neck like a scarf with hypocritical discretion. It was a dress as suitable for confession as it was seductive for the commission of a sin.

The first glance of the Maharajah paid Concha Guerrero for all her trouble. The trouble was trivial, even pleasant, for in catching her fish she loved nothing better than the setting of her nets.

“Mademoiselle Guerrero! Concha, my dear, you are beautiful!” he exclaimed, as he hastened across the private room in which he received her.

As he flew to her he seized her dainty hands which were about to take hold of her dress to make a curtsy. He pressed them to his lips, continuing his flattering remarks:

“Our Bengal roses are not more beautiful nor so fresh as you! . . . And compared with you, their perfume is as nothing,” he continued when he had smothered these charming hands, that he held, with kisses; first on the backs, then on the palms and up to the wrists where the fine skin is streaked with blue veins.

“Truthfully, my dear, the touch of your skin is exquisite! I have never known rose petals or the finest silks of such delicate softness!”

“Ah! Your Highness! Your Highness! . . . Spare my modesty!” murmured Guerrero in a trembling

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voice; whilst at the same time she thought to herself: Things are going splendidly!

"Your modesty? How can that suffer from admiration which is so justly deserved?"

The Maharajah had guided his companion towards the low divan that he had left to greet her and set her there at once.

"There is such a vast chasm between the attentions which Your Highness showers upon me and the feeble merits of my humble person!"

"Concha Guerrero," said the Maharajah, smiling, "you are a treasure, and you speak with that charm so dear to Eastern hearts."

"Your Highness, by repeating it, compels me to admit it, in order not to contradict him."

"Do you really appreciate compliments from such a negligible admirer as myself?" he inquired in a casual tone as his eyes twinkled under his heavy eyelids.

"What! Negligible!" she protested with heartfelt indignation. . . . "How can Your Highness say such a thing when you are the person in question!"

"You are so delightful, Concha! So attractive, so truly alluring. . . ."

"Anyway, here I have a man who knows the value of time and doesn't waste it in futile formalities," she thought in her heart, as outwardly she still pretended to be confused at listening to such extravagant compliments.

"And clever too, for you are, you know, Concha!"

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Not only is your body beautiful, your mind is so well balanced . . . it is perhaps that that I appreciate the most in you! ”

“ Your Highness is really too flattering! ”

Concha realized the peculiar turn the conversation was taking. Why should her host pay such compliments to her intelligence?

“ No one could ever get the better of you, my pearl,” continued the Maharajah. “ Though I have heard that you have been very badly treated by those who ought to have looked after you and appreciated you.”

This interest in her gave her confidence. She seized the opportunity of retailing her distressful position with delight.

“ Alas! It is terrible, my dear, to be alone, without protection, without support! I am by nature so sensitive! It is death to me, I assure you, to live without someone to love me and to spoil me! ”

She had slipped her hand through his arm. She bent over to him. She seemed to want to rest on his shoulder.

“ Poor dear soul! How right I was to ask you to come! ”

“ Yes. . . . I confess that your invitation realized the dearest wish of my heart. . . . ”

In saying that to the person whom she felt sure already belonged to her, Concha Guerrero slipped down upon the divan. Obliging, her beautiful dress, slow in following her movement, revealed her knees and about half an inch of bare skin above the top of her

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stockings. She held up her face, a smile on her lips, whilst with her free hand she waved under the Prince's nose a delicately perfumed handkerchief which fell between her gold-embroidered sandals.

Daintily the Maharajah picked it up. For a moment he held it, pressing its fragile fabric in his fingers as he gazed at the marvellous creature who so caressingly clung to him.

"Dear Mademoiselle Guerrero, I do not doubt your kind intentions," said the Hindu with exquisite courtesy. "But please take your handkerchief. It is not at me that you must throw it!"

He had put it into her hand and, with persuasive pressure, pressed her fingers over it.

With a gesture of astonishment, Concha sat up. She looked at His Highness with alarm at having understood his refusal. Seeing her look of amazement, the Maharajah explained his projects.

"I must tell you that I have not invited you here, my charming friend, to start a flirtation with you, but in the hope that you would aid me with the power of your beauty."

"The power of my beauty. . . . What to do?"

"To fascinate another man."

"Oh!"

Concha choked with rage.

"Your disappointment is very flattering to me," the Maharajah admitted, regretting for the moment that his State policy compelled him to yield to Armstrong

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charms that he would have very much liked to have kept for himself. . . . " But let us come straight to the point. . . . Come with me on to the terrace. I will show you something that will interest you, I am sure."

The Maharajah's unexpected project intrigued her. She rose as he suggested, pulling down her dress with a feeling of annoyance.

"Your Highness really thinks that this will interest me?" she inquired with a reserved air, so as not to exhibit too obviously her curiosity.

"I am absolutely convinced!"

As he said this, the Maharajah took her hand and put it in his arm, for she had become a little distant. . . .

"Didn't I tell you just now in paying my deserved tribute to the charms that the gods have bestowed upon you, that I was attracted above all by your well-balanced mind? I feel sure that I have not over-rated your intelligence and that in a few moments we shall both share the same opinion. . . . Come along, dear friend, let me hold back the *portière* for you. . . . I have, you see, my large and small means of exit. This one is quite discreet. . . . The terrace to which it leads is built in such a way that no one on it can be seen . . . whilst it gives a full view of the gardens. . . . Mind the steps . . . hold on to me. . . . I must apologize for not having servants here to help you. But I prefer being alone with you. Our plans concern nobody else, do they, my dear Concha?"

"Certainly not, I quite understand, my dear," she

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replied, realizing that the request was in reality a command.

"You know, I am honestly enchanted with you! Stand behind this white marble screen, and look at those people walking in the avenue over there."

Concha put her face close to the white stone arabesques.

"I can see two men. . . . I don't know who they are. . . . However, without taxing too greatly the high intelligence that Your Highness attributes to me . . ."

"Do you mean to be naughty, I wonder, Mademoiselle Guerrero, and are you going to make fun of me?"

"Far from it, Your Highness! I was saying that without worrying myself to death, I can recognize by the turban and the colour of his skin that one of them belongs to your race; the other is wearing a khaki cap; according to all appearances he is in His Majesty's army."

The Maharajah, without speaking, looked at her with an amused expression.

"Yes," continued Concha, emphasizing her remark with a pat on his shoulder as though she were relieving herself of an intolerable burden. "In breaking with that brute Mitchell Smith, I have broken with his king, his people and his laws! Haven't you noticed that I am once more Mlle. Concha Guerrero, a simple girl from the West Indies, where I was born?"

"Mademoiselle Guerrero," said the Maharajah, with

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disconcerting seriousness, "His Majesty the King of England is my protector—I may even say my friend, since I have been received by him at Windsor. Although I congratulate you on having broken the bonds which bound you to that wretched Mitchell Smith, and consequently I cannot blame you for taking a dislike to people of his nationality. If you despise them, my dear, you will have to try and foster other feelings towards them."

"In what way do you mean? "

"In renewing relations . . . and very intimate ones, with your ex-husband's countrymen. . . . Or, to be more precise, with one of them who is living here. You are quite right, you have seen him; there is over there, near the orchid bed, an Indian, the Hon. Hiram Sing, who has the pleasure of being my Minister of the Interior, and an Englishman, Captain Ronald Armstrong, the Political Agent of the British Government. It is he whom I wish you to take particular notice of."

"Yes, certainly. I am looking at him. . . . I may add, with particular attention," declared Concha, her eyes glued to an opening in the carved screen, her hands shielding them on each side in order to see more clearly. "I can see that he is . . . Why yes . . . he is a handsome young man. He must be about six feet high. . . . If I am making a mistake, Your Highness will no doubt correct me. At this distance, I may be wrong. He is not much over nine stone—a regular athlete. I should like to see him in a swimming

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costume. Tell me now, what colour is his hair? His confounded cap covers his head, and that interests me."

"He is fair, my dear."

"That is no answer; there are all sorts of fair hair. Is it golden or is it tow colour?"

"Oh, no! Golden . . . how shall I describe it?—golden silk, if there is such a thing!"

"Good! I don't like blondes very much and it would have annoyed me if such a finely built man had been disfigured by tow-coloured hair. But I forgive his colour on account of his muscular frame and the freedom of his gait. But his eyes?"

"As you may imagine," said the Maharajah, after a moment's reflection, "I am unable to say much about them. Except that they are frank and open. He is English, so they should be blue."

"I know some Englishmen whose eyes are absolutely green."

"Green? That's it! I suppose they must be green."

"Unless they are grey."

"It is quite possible!"

"Say you don't know. That will be simpler."

"Ah, well, you shall have plenty of opportunities to form your own opinion on this important point. But it is not necessary to see a man in a swimming costume to find out the colour of his eyes. To-day I should like you to have a general impression of him."

"Good!" said Concha. "I've had one. And a

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fairly detailed one. I think you have described him. Aren't you satisfied? "

"No. I should like to know if he has created a good impression."

"Well, certainly not a bad one. What are you driving at? "

"Simply this—I want you to drop your handkerchief to Captain Armstrong. It is he that I wish you to attract. It is through your charm that I count on keeping him in my capital as long as possible."

Concha made a little grimace that did not add to her beauty. As a rule she realized to a nicety the defects of her features and avoided sulky expressions. She preferred to confine herself to merriment or tragedy. But since the Maharajah declined to be her protector and went so far as to try to throw her into the arms of another, *there was no harm in allowing him to see her making a wry face.* And she felt that way. If physically the Maharajah's proposition suited her better than that which she had anticipated when she came to meet him, financially it would be less profitable. Well, financial possibilities were to Concha the most important considerations. And since he needed a service, she thought it advisable to show him that it would cost him something to obtain it. The Maharajah, after all, might change his mind. In order to induce him to do so, she exclaimed pathetically:

"Oh! Is the sun begging me to content myself with its shadow? "

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"Dear Concha, the sun will throw his light upon this shadow . . . if you succeed. By the way, come with me to my apartments. I have not yet shown you all I wish you to see."

This time Concha did not experience the slightest difficulty in finding the way from the terrace to the Maharajah's room. The light that the Maharajah had spoken about seemed to be a valuable stimulant. She was eager, as soon as she saw signs of business, to discuss terms.

The Prince, however, did not give her the opportunity. As the *portière* fell behind them, he did not hesitate to put aside the subject of supreme interest that remained to be settled between them.

"I am really a deplorable host! You have travelled sixty miles to get here and I have not yet offered you any refreshment."

Concha smiled ironically.

"You have offered me an Englishman. Don't you call that a little refreshment, Highness?"

"That is not a satisfactory one at the moment. I ought to have remembered that your most urgent need was to give you something to revive you. In order to show that you forgive me, you must be as gentle with me as a fawn and as delightful as a shady place to a traveller. Fortunately my servants are less negligent than their master. Which would you prefer, my fascinating friend, a European tea or an Indian collation?"

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"For the dainties of your country, Highness, I have a tremendous liking; in fact for everything from your wonderful land! But please don't bother," she added, as she saw him busily taking out of a huge sideboard a number of dishes of sweets, bowls of fruit, of cream and plates of burnt pistachio nuts. . . . "I don't want anything much. I have infinitely more pressing things on my mind. . . ."

She punctuated this last phrase with a deep sigh.

"Forget them, dear. Forget them for my sake. It is a moment of tenderness," he remarked as, facing the Cuban, he offered her the sweetmeat, which she refused.

"Listen to that music," he said as he nibbled a couple of sweets. "Isn't it marvellously ethereal? Doesn't it make you forget all worldly worries?"

"No!" she replied firmly, determined not to lose sight of realities. "Instead of making me forget them, it makes me think of them. Tell me, where does it come from?"

"It is a voice from another world," replied the Maharajah with a quizzical smile.

Concha shrugged her shoulders.

"Do you take me for a small child?"

"Not even for a small woman, dear Concha, and I hasten to tell you fairly and squarely exactly what you may expect. This music, since you ask me, comes from my special orchestra whose members are shut up in the next room. The acoustic properties of these apartments have been arranged in such a way that the slightest

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sound of the string of the *esraj* reaches us, although nothing spoken here can be heard in that room."

"And will you tell me why you have taken all these marvellous precautions during our interview? The meeting without servants by whom you are usually attended?"

"For the reason that I already gave you just now. What we arrange must remain a secret between us alone!"

"Then it is important, this mission . . . very diplomatic?"

"Have I done anything that would make me appear to be playing a stupid joke?"

"In short, will Your Highness deign to tell me what advantage I shall reap in an undertaking in which I risk my entire reputation?"

Concha had the sang-froid to say this without a smile. The Prince, with all the ease in the world, assumed also the same dignified tone:

"You will reap the advantage of obliging me, dear Concha. And I am not an ungrateful person. Are you a little curious?"

"I am, I admit it!"

"Then come and look here," he said, going to a maple-wood cabinet. "This piece of furniture is very old. It looks very solid . . . and you will see that it is, for very good reasons. Press that tiger's eye carved there on the right. Press hard, my dear! Are you afraid it might scratch you?"

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Concha did as she was told.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, stepping back when she saw the front of the cabinet suddenly turn.

"Don't be alarmed, there is no danger. You have only to open one of the many secret drawers. It is in such places we poor sovereigns are forced to hide some of our treasures. Life not being always very safe in our palaces. . . ."

As he was speaking, the Maharajah went up to Concha in front of the cabinet, the carving of which showed tigers fighting elephants.

"This secret drawer," he said, "contains several cases. You can see for yourself the contents are of some value."

Opening one, he displayed on a black velvet lining some magnificent jewels: pearl necklaces, sets of sapphires, tiaras of rubies and topazes, and a splendid string of emeralds and diamonds.

Concha held her breath as if her respiration had been impeded. The Prince noticed it, and enjoyed her astonishment. He caressed her shoulder and spoke coaxingly:

"Would you like to have these pearls around your neck? Or this tiara of rubies on your head? Or this sapphire pendant? Unless you would prefer these emeralds, eh?"

Concha hesitated like a child in a toy shop.

"Shall we try how these emeralds look on your shoulders?"

The Prince untied her scarf, unfastened her dress and

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displayed her shoulders. When the jewels lay on her dazzling skin, Concha shut her eyes and her bosom heaved under the caress of the precious stones.

"Splendid!" exclaimed the Maharajah, without indicating whether he was speaking of the woman or the jewels. "I am happy to see that this collar pleases you, my dear little ally. . . ."

"But . . . but I don't understand . . ." murmured Concha, dumbfounded.

"Oh, it is very simple, my dear. . . . These emeralds will be yours when you have found out how to fascinate and detain at Jahlpore His Excellence the Viceroy's special agent."

"Your Highness refers to . . . Captain Armstrong?"

"That is right, Concha. You were asking me just now if that handsome officer's eyes were grey, blue or green. In your place I should quickly find out if the colour goes well with the emeralds which I am setting aside for you! I should like to think that in your opinion the glances of a man have never had so great a value!"

X

INSTEAD of saying "Come in!" as one does in Europe, Concha Guerrero raised her hand. Immediately the bronze statuette, who acted as attendant, came to life in the corner where she had been squatting and went to the door. When she had opened it, the rounded figure, dark eyes and mauve sari of Mirra appeared out of the shadows.

"Her Highness the Maharance wishes to know how you are, mademoiselle, and would be greatly pleased if you would honour her with a visit," she said, bowing low.

"You give me great delight by condescending to bring this gracious message from my illustrious friend," replied Concha, who entered heart and soul into the flowery compliments of the East. "Would you be so good as to add to your great kindness by letting Her Highness know that I shall be with her in an instant."

"May you come as expeditiously as possible," remarked Mirra with a smile, "for the moments that we spend deprived of your presence are as cold and barren as the wintry hours lived in snow-clad mountains."

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"I will hurry like a thirsty gazelle towards a fresh spring," Concha replied at once, keeping up to the flowery metaphors.

Whereupon Mirra, after another salutation, went off to her mistress.

With very slight variations, the same scene was repeated many times a day. Because now that she had made a compact with the Maharajah, Concha had left the impersonal guest-house reserved to guests on short visits, and found herself installed in the palace itself. Four rooms thickly carpeted, the walls painted a delicate shade of green with a frieze of lotus flowers, had been assigned to her near the zenana. She was leading a lazy, luxurious life that she was thoroughly enjoying. It was so unexpected. A woman servant kept guard over her when she slept and offered her tea or coffee in tiny cups inlaid with gold when she awoke. If she desired, she could be aroused with music. The slightest raising of her voice reduced to a state of dutiful alarm the half-dozen other servants who were detailed to her service, and who showered her with attentions far beyond those of the lady's maid whom she had left at Calcutta. She enjoyed the sovereign power that she possessed over them. It was like a game to her.

Whilst awaiting opportunities of making a conquest of Captain Armstrong, she thoroughly enjoyed other distractions that her association with the Maharanee provided. At their first meeting the Maharanee had

felt an instinctive liking for Concha. She had realized that this affable woman might be very useful to her. The attentions she received left no doubt as regards that; but the courteously distant manner with which they were dispensed told her clearly she need not be jealous; and any pretext was good enough to get the Cuban to come to her apartments.

She had not any need as a rule to send for her, for Concha made free use of the fact that she had been told to look upon the zenana as her own quarters. Before Mirra came to fetch her, she had of her own accord spent part of the morning there. She had gone away to change her costume, which she did at least six times a day. Changing from a simple sports suit suitable to the morning, to a riding-habit; then from a tennis dress she had changed into a "gala intime" for her visit to the Maharanee; the dressing in this instance was an especially long affair, for Concha was anxious to appear at her best at the *musicale* that her august friend was giving in her honour.

Three dabs of her powder-puff toned down Concha's nose and chin. Her heels tapped along the corridor where Brinda's footsteps were no longer heard. Without knocking, she turned the handle of the zenana door, and as if a signal had been given, an orchestra struck up. Clothed in saffron-coloured tunics, wearing wreathes of white frangipanes, fifteen young girls began playing the guitars that rested on their knees.

"You appeal to my heart like the rising moon," said

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the Maharanee affably, adapting the words of the song to Concha's arrival.

"The great kindness of Your Highness fills my heart with confusion," she replied, after having kissed the hand that her hostess had held out to her. Then, with a wave of the hand, she returned the salute of the ladies present.

"I am distressed to think that Your Highness has perhaps been waiting for me," she continued as she nestled down into the Maharanee's cushions with the familiarity of a domestic cat.

"My dear bright star," cooed the Maharanee, quite accustomed by now to Concha's unpunctuality. "Did you have the orchids you wanted for your table? And will you try this Assam tea? If you would care for whisky, I can give you some of the Prince's. Savitri, who reads European books, pretends that women in your part of the world take a great deal to drink in order to keep their good looks."

"Is it true?" asked Parvati, who never spoke without putting on a frightened air, as if she expected to be thrashed for having opened her mouth, "is it true that in Paris or London or Berlin a woman in society every morning takes a bath in champagne, and that it is a great favour for those who are then admitted to drink a glass full?"

"Don't pay any attention to Parvati," Mirra protested, "she reads at random and repeats without understanding. Tell me, however, if it is true that your

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fellow-countrywomen in the West have regular male zenanas? ”

The Maharanee interrupted them suddenly by banging a brass plate which sounded like a cymbal.

“Don't worry about Western affairs which don't concern you,” she called out in a sharp voice. “Thanks to the shades of your ancestors, you will not leave the shelter of the zenana. Busy yourselves with things that concern you! My delightful Concha, forgive me for reprimanding somewhat severely these foolish creatures. The breezes that blow from the West upset their brains, so I am suspicious of their curiosity. . . . Ah! What is the matter? How dare you interfere when I am giving a musical entertainment for Mlle. Guerrero? ”

The Princess's last remark was addressed to a stuttering woman who had just come in.

In a torrent of words quite unintelligible to Concha, she delivered herself of a message. It was evidently a matter of some importance, because the Maharanee's complexion turned a leaden colour from the emotion it caused, and the other women clucked every now and then in chorus, evidently at the most terrible parts of the narrative. The young musicians were the only unperturbed people: their humble rank did not allow them to take part in the excitement; they remained unmoved like the instruments whose vibrations they had quietened under their palms.

But the sly looks they exchanged with each other

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led Concha to believe that it was a tasty bit of scandal. The Maharanee clapped her hands loudly, calling to the musicians, who immediately made themselves scarce. When the door had shut on the heels of the last one, the Princess immediately turned to her guest.

"Dear Concha, I hope you will forgive this interruption of the fête that I was so pleased to offer you, but a terrible disgrace has overtaken my house."

"What unforeseen misfortune has come upon Your Highness?" Concha exclaimed with great interest, inspired by sentiments very far removed from those of pure charity.

"Unforeseen is hardly a suitable word in this case, for the grief which is troubling me to-day is an old sorrow that has been weighing upon me for twenty years. At that time, as you are doubtless unaware, His Highness was very much taken with a Viennese lady of a certain beauty by whom he had a daughter. The mother disappeared soon after, but her daughter is still with us. She is living in the palace. This mixture of blood produces a very unsatisfactory character. Her thoughtless insults have already forced me to forbid her coming to my apartments except when I send for her; and I have just heard that she has been seen walking out by herself with her face uncovered in the temple of Siva! In spite of the warnings I have given her, she has neither modesty regarding herself nor respect for our customs. I am bound to punish her in an exemplary fashion!"

"It must be a terrible sorrow to you, for the Maha-

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rajah deserves better than to have a child of that description! " Concha remarked, very intrigued by the story.

" You will see her: she is more indecent than a female chimpanzee," she muttered. Her hate causing her to employ an epithet in describing her. " But here she is."

A sudden noise caused Concha to look towards the wide open doorway in which Brinda's slim, proud figure was framed. Two women were holding her. When she entered the room, they let her go. There were red marks on her fragile wrists where they had gripped her. These grievous marks did not move either Concha or the women of the zenana to pity. The latter drew back as if by her mere approach they were in danger of being contaminated. Concha went nearer to her. Not that she thought of helping this young girl, whose sad eyes and grief-stricken expression did not condescend to ask for pardon, but on the contrary to take better stock of her.

Concha was seized with that bitter envy that women feel whose only asset is beauty which they know will not last much longer when they are in the presence of dazzling youth like Brinda. If there had been any need, she would have taken the trouble to stir up the Maharanee's hatred. This half-breed was indeed too pretty!

" Shameless virgin! Fleshly sinner! " exclaimed the Maharanee in English so that Concha should understand. (For she anticipated that to be treated like this

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before someone whom she considered to be her equal, the insult to Brinda would be more cruel.) "I have found the punishment to suit you: you will be stripped of your sari to the waist on the terrace of the servants' quarters and exposed to the view of those who pass by on the road. . . . You choose to go and walk outside the palace like a lost woman and you offend our gods by exposing your face! . . . Ah, well, the first comer will see you as he passes and will soil your body with his gaze! Take her away! "

Overwhelmed with despair, Brinda listened to this sentence as though she had not heard it. Before she had time to realize the shock of the punishment that awaited her, the attendants took her away, eager to satisfy their hate of race and caste.

Hot and perspiring on her divan, the Maharanee fanned herself furiously to pull herself together. When she regained her composure, she remarked to Concha:

"That is how it is necessary to punish women of bad instincts."

"What a strange punishment!" ejaculated Concha, whose finer feelings had been seriously blunted by her life as an adventuress. "Do you think that the culprit will mind very much? If she has taken sun baths in Europe . . ."

"I know Brinda's pride," said the Maharanee with a sinister smile. "Although she flouts our customs, she respects prejudices of her European education. It is because I know how to move her that I have wounded

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her like that. But we have talked enough about her for the present! Let us continue the entertainment as though this girl had not interfered with our enjoyment by her outrageous behaviour."

Mirra recalled the musicians, who reappeared in their saffron-coloured tunics. Instead of the languid airs that they had previously indulged in, they began to play gay tunes. Two, then four, and then all began to sing. After that two very handsome dark girls that Concha had not seen before, one in silver spangles, the other in golden, trilled a Tangorian song taken from the *Varcha Mongal*, one of the cycle of songs of the rainy season.

In spite of the diversion of the spectacle, the thought of Brinda overpowered her. Although she had said that she wished to forget her, the Maharanee also could not help thinking more of her stepdaughter than her dancers. A prince's daughter in the pillory is, after all, a very unusual sight. So, very graciously, in order to pamper her friend, Her Highness suggested:

"Would it amuse you, my precious pearl, to see what sort of an expression of countenance this shameless one is adopting?"

"Yes," replied Concha without a moment's hesitation. "It would be definitely amusing!"

"Then follow me. We must go cautiously. If she knows we are there, she would be artful enough to compose her features to prevent us from seeing her confusion. Lend me your arm, my dear; if we go together we shall be less noticeable."

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In the servants' court two women were carrying out the order given by the Maharanee's attendants, to prevent any man in the palace from coming near the Princess.

Some old man-servant attached to her from her infancy might have been able, to spare her feelings, to pretend to have seen her, but that would not have satisfied the wishes of the Maharanee; for, in order that the mental punishment should be complete, it was essential that a stranger should come along whose curiosity would be particularly offensive to her.

"Your orders have been carried out, Highness!" said Mirra, bowing low. For Mirra would not for anything have missed accompanying the attendants when they led the culprit away. "This shameless girl is tied up on the terrace at the side of the road. As soon as she has been seen by a man, we will take her back to her room as you have ordered."

"Very good!" said the Maharanee. "I will satisfy myself on that point."

Leaving Mirra there, very annoyed at not being invited to the entertainment, the Maharanee went with Concha into an unused guard-room whose window looked on to both the road and the terrace. They shut the door behind them and then took their seats as if they were in a theatre.

Through the lattice-work of the window they were able, without being observed, to see Brinda about twenty yards away. She had been left alone on the narrow

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terrace which was raised above the road just enough to allow the culprit to be seen. Her sari had been pulled down to her waist; all ornaments and clothing had been taken away which might have slightly hidden the exquisite shape of her well-formed, delicate figure with its dainty rosebuds. In order that she could not turn away or bend down or cover her nakedness, with her arms she had been bound to two rings in the wall. She had to remain there without any hope of escaping from her punishment.

Being tied up like that against a rough stone wall, her dazzling skin seemed more exquisitely delicate than ever. In childish anguish, Brinda had shut her eyes, as if not seeing herself would save her from being seen by a man. The thought of that man who was sure to pass tortured her girlish modesty and wrung from her cries that she had refused to utter to the Maharanee. What she suffered in her purity, in her delicacy, she did not want that vixen even to suspect. She had already gloried enough in ordering her to be punished and treating her as a slave. There was no necessity for her to know how much civilization and a European education added to the intolerableness of this treatment.

An Indian, no matter of what caste, was about to look at her either with contempt or desire. She shuddered at the very thought. Beads of sweat stood on her forehead and on her neck.

"Can you see properly, my dear?" murmured the Maharanee.

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"Yes, she seems to be trembling," remarked Concha in the same tone. "The sun, however, is very powerful."

"That is typical, my dear. It is inherited; her mother was a bundle of nerves."

"Do you think she is going to faint? Perhaps it would be wiser to stop the punishment?" Concha muttered with regret. But she was not well versed as to how far the justice of a Maharanee can go.

"Not at all! If she faints, she can be brought to again with cold water. I should be extremely angry if she were not conscious when a passer-by saw her. The punishment would be incomplete. . . ."

"You need not be afraid. . . . She has just turned her head. . . . Listen. . . . I can hear someone coming along the road! Look! It is a man on horse-back! "

"Good! He will be raised higher and will be able to see her better," remarked the Maharanee, screwing up her eyes to peep between the interstices of the lattice-work at a man lethargic and bored-looking, whose horse was coming towards them at walking pace and was as yet under the shade of the mango trees and the acacias.

XI

BRUTALLY, the light of the sun dragged this horseman from the shade, showing up the brown leather of his top-boots and the buttons of his khaki tunic. The horse was coming at walking pace; it was mounted by Captain Armstrong, who, that day, was trying to kill his boredom by a ride in the outskirts of Jahlpore. Concha started up. Curiosity, keener if possible, than that of the Maharanee, had taken possession of her and had brought her close to the Princess against the trellis-work, in order to follow the unexpected turn of events.

Deep in thought, Captain Armstrong drew nearer, looking vaguely into space in front of him. His view was cut off for the moment by a cloud of dust. In twenty yards he would have passed Brinda without seeing her, if the sunlight which played upon her and lit up her satin-like skin had not caught his eye.

Suddenly aroused from his reverie, he gazed at the unexpected sight on the terrace. He had too much good taste not to appreciate the shape of the neck, the graceful curve of her young shoulders and her youthful rose-tipped breasts; but he was more astonished than

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ever: firstly by the whiteness of the skin, which would have been the envy of many an Occidental; then that, for a reason unknown to him, this woman should remain there in this attitude without moving. The explanation was forthcoming from an impotent attempt that Brinda made to escape. He was sorry for her. He pulled up his horse with the intention of intervening to put an end to her torture. Seeing no one about, his eyes fell upon the victim.

Brinda, terrified, had heard him coming. Now at the hour of her humiliation she shut her eyes tightly, and, not being able to hide her body, tried at least to turn away her face as far as possible.

From the trembling of her breast, he could have counted the beatings of her heart, but his eyes were riveted upon her bent head and her flushed cheek; suddenly he saw large tears that her eyes could not contain. Such modesty in her distress disconcerted him. The servants, ashamed that he had seen the punishment, did not hesitate to express their protestations of innocence. And also this exhibition was something new, a punishment to which she was not accustomed?

In spite of his curiosity, he did not stay to inquire what crime the young woman with the virginal face who wept from shame had committed. Putting his spurs to his horse, he rode on with an unpleasant feeling. It was as though he had committed an indiscretion that was unworthy of him.

The sound of the horse's hoofs dying away conveyed

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to Brinda the knowledge that her torture was over. She had wished to see nothing; she thought she would never know who it was whom Fate had offered to the Maharanee as her accomplice.

In their observation post Concha and the Maharanee looked at each other dumbfounded. Having neither the good-feeling nor the intelligence to understand the psychological reasons of Armstrong's disappearance, the Maharanee very soon determined what to do. She went to the door of the guard-room and called out into the court:

"You can take her away. . . . A man of her mother's race has seen her. I am satisfied."

The wall, more kindly than the people, protected Brinda, for it prevented the voice of the Maharanee from reaching her. The courtyard held back this information which would have tortured the poor girl still further.

A door in the wall flew open and gave passage to the servants who, with ironical laughter, unfastened the cords that bound her. Her pale face and her eyes full of tears caused them great amusement that they sought to lengthen out by pretending to support her and so keeping her in their midst.

Not being interested in what happened to her, Concha and the Maharanee went back to the zenana.

"Do you know," asked Concha as they went, "who the man on horseback was?"

"No!"

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"Captain Armstrong, the English Political Agent."

"So much the better! I did not expect the girl would be so thoroughly punished."

And if she had suspected that Brinda did not know, she would have run and told her herself, in spite of the rules of etiquette.

A few days later the Maharajah announced that he was organizing a hunt in honour of his beautiful visitor.

The handsome Kumbha Sing was deputed to issue the invitation.

"A tiger hunt!" exclaimed Concha, clapping her hands. "That's most exciting."

"Have you shot tigers before, mademoiselle?"

"No, but I have a friend in London who has a superb skin on the floor beside her bed. . . ."

"A tiger skin?"

"No, a white bear skin. One of her friends gave it to her, and he was a great tiger hunter. . . . Don't you see?"

"Haven't you ever seen a tiger alive?"

"Yes. At the New York Zoo."

"You won't be nervous?"

"No, my dear captain. I assure you that fear and myself are not bedfellows."

Kumbha Sing appreciated her repartee, and smilingly replied:

"I can quite believe that, and when Mr. Stripes, as Kipling calls him, leaps out of the jungle, it is as though

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your quarry was dancing a shimmy at the end of your gun."

"I am sure it must be thrilling."

"Even men are unnerved. Last year His Highness gave a shoot to a Member of Parliament. When the tiger appeared, the Labour leader fired and killed a monkey hanging on to the top of an acacia tree."

"So he missed the tiger?"

"Oh, no. The tiger lay dead."

"Killed by the fall of the monkey?"

The captain did not appreciate this ill-timed piece of humour. He solemnly explained:

"Killed by a bullet from the rifle of a shikari on another elephant who fired at the same instant. You see, mademoiselle, that Indian Rajah's guests never miss their tigers. If they fired with a toy pistol, the beast would fall all the same, killed by a skilled shot who fires at the same instant as the blunderer."

"Oh! I see!"

"We have to satisfy the amour-propre of European visitors who, later, will tell the story at the club, reacting the scene: 'I was in the jungle. . . . I caught sight of the dangerous beast. I fired. . . .'"

"And so somebody will kill it for me!"

"That is so!"

"And who will shoot the tiger that I shall miss?"

Captain Kumbha Sing became mysterious and whispered:

"Captain Armstrong, mademoiselle. He is an

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excellent shot, and His Highness is pleased that your first introduction with our Political Agent will be on an elephant's back. It is not so commonplace as in a drawing-room."

"Ah! I see you are *au courant* with . . . with . . ."

He gave a blasé smile. And as if he preferred to ignore the little conspiracy arranged by his august master, he screwed up his eyes.

"I know. . . . I know. . . . You are the enchantress that His Highness is putting in the Englishman's path."

"And do you think I shall succeed in . . ."

"In enchanting him? It would indeed be a very poor compliment to your eyes, mademoiselle, to question their seductive powers."

"But it seems that this Armstrong is, as we say, a hard nut to crack!"

"Your white hands will soon crush the hard shell."

"Enough compliments, Kumbha Sing. Let us speak frankly."

"Then I really think you will succeed without the slightest difficulty. I know Armstrong well. His heart is not so easily lit as tinder. Perhaps he is awaiting his grand passion. In any case, I have not known him to have any affair here."

"So much the better. I like difficult tasks. I have been able to manage men who are even more inaccessible."

"I am sure of it, mademoiselle."

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Kumbha Sing left Concha. His remarks set her thinking. It was necessary to win in order to get those beautiful emeralds. She took stock of her arsenal and wondered which weapons she would employ. At once the reserved manner he had shown to Brinda came back to her mind. She concluded that he was a modest man, very conventional, so that she ought to make the attack with an air of innocence.

The sound of hunting horns was disturbing the peaceful dawn. In the elephants' quarters the burning brazier was waiting to be put out. Everywhere the shikaris were busy over their final preparations. The cars with the guests began to arrive, and the mahouts in consequence were bringing out the elephants that were detailed to carry the baggage, tents, provisions, arms, munitions and beaters. Obediently the beasts got up to go and kneel a little farther on.

Interested in all these preparations, Concha, in a short tunic and brown riding-boots, wandered about in the busy courtyard amongst the servants too busy to notice her. There was a certain amount of danger, for from time to time packages fell from the elephants' backs. A hand pulled her out of the way.

"I think I ought to warn you that it is very risky there, madame!" said a voice with a British ring about it that pleased Concha.

"Is it really?" she asked, turning an ingenuously fascinating gaze upon the speaker. "What a pity. I

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was enjoying myself so much! I was wondering whether I could not go and pat the nearest of those elephants! ”

“I should advise you not to do so. These hunting elephants are not pet dogs. They know their mahouts, and however soft your hand may be, I should not risk it.”

“What a shame! They say that elephant’s hair brings luck! ”

“In a ring, yes. But not on the tail of a live one. These animals are tame, certainly, but they are capricious, and it is always necessary to approach them with care. You have never been hunting, madame? ”

“It is the first time I have made war against tigers on four legs. I am accustomed to wild beasts on two legs! ”

“I am sure you are. That is why I warned you.”

Armstrong looked at her with the smile of a man who is very reserved.

“How grateful I am to you,” she simpered. “I am such a child . . . so thoughtless! I need a nurse. May I possibly know who it is that is so kind to me? ”

“Ah! pardon me for not introducing myself sooner. I should have done so before had it not been necessary to put you on your guard. I am Captain Armstrong, Political Agent to the Maharajah of Jahlpore. May I humbly present myself to you, madame.”

“Mademoiselle,” said Concha, correcting and detaining him, for after having led him to the shade on the terrace, the captain was about to leave her. . . .

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"Mademoiselle Concha Guerrero. An islander like yourself. Although my isle is smaller than yours. I was born in Cuba, but I have lived most of my life in England."

"I am delighted," he replied, "to find someone who is almost of my own country. It is a pleasant surprise."

"We shall probably be the only Europeans at the shoot, so I hope that we shall not be far apart."

"I hope not," added Armstrong out of politeness.

He thought Concha pretty, nothing more, and did not seem to attach any importance regarding her company on the drive. Being a true sportsman, he would have willingly sacrificed this meeting to the pleasure of bagging another tiger.

"I should be nervous if I had one of these Indians near me," she murmured, as she looked around for the Maharajah.

She particularly wished to be seen talking to her future victim without having waited to be introduced to him. Although her cleverness so far meant nothing towards her getting the emeralds, she tried to see in it an omen of success, and it would be all to the good if the Prince recognized it as a proof of her *savoir-faire*. So as soon as she saw her august accomplice, she waved a friendly greeting, and taking Armstrong by the arm, led him to meet him.

"How is it Your Highness has not told me that so perfect a cavalier as Captain Armstrong was here?" she said with a charming smile.

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"Doubtless because I was a trifle jealous!" the Prince retorted. "At my age one is not anxious to see handsome young men in the company of his lady friends. But I will try and make honourable amends for my negligence. I depute our worthy captain to be the companion and guardian of your inestimable person for the day. What do you say to that, my radiant Mlle. Guerrero?"

"Nothing could be more delightful, Highness."

"However, for the journey, captain, Mlle. Guerrero shall come in my car. I will hand her over when we reach the hunting ground. If you have no objection?"

"By all means, Highness."

"So-long, captain!" said Concha, holding out her hand for him to kiss.

Armstrong contented himself by shaking it, and went to join the other guests.

"My congratulations. I think your quarry is already attracted—very much so," remarked the Maharajah as soon as they were alone in the car.

"I think so, Highness!" Concha agreed without modesty.

"Don't forget to keep me posted as to how things are going."

After an hour's journey through the bushwood, the cars pulled up to wait for the elephants. They had taken a short cut across country.

The Prince helped his companion to alight, murmuring:

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"And now, Concha, the chase begins. Have you your ammunition?"

"Look at my eyes, Highness?"

The Maharajah smiled.

"With those eyes, I am sure you will bring down your man point-blank!"

Armstrong came to fetch her to take her to the elephant that the chief shikari in charge of the shoot had set apart for him. He greeted her with a rather stiff bow. And in an equally reserved manner she put three fingers on his arm as he offered to help her into the howdah, whilst the well-trained animal waited for the dig of the mahout's heel to rise. Taking great care not to graze its haunch nor its shoulder, Concha took her seat beside Armstrong.

She gave several frightened little exclamations as the elephant hurried along to catch up the others, and remarked in a childish manner:

"This reminds me of when I was fifteen and used to go on Sundays to the zoo!"

She was true to the rôle she had determined to adopt. She played the part of a silly little *ingénue* and waited for the captain to make the first advances, as he assuredly would do according to the accepted rules of the game.

The jolting on the back of an elephant is very apt to bring two people sitting side by side in a howdah close together. For half an hour Armstrong replied pleasantly to the chatter of his neighbour. After that he paid more attention to his gun than to the young woman.

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Concha was ready to play the same game. But it was not a matter of satisfying her offended dignity. It was necessary for her, as Kumbha Sing had said, to break down the reserve of this man who was not given to affairs of the heart and to cure his indifference. Concha hesitated for a moment. Ought she to pretend that she had been stung by a mosquito in order to expose her shoulder a little more to her companion and make him take notice of her?

She thought of a more ingenious method which would have a better chance of interesting him. She picked up in the howdah, without him seeing, a stalk of grass that she pushed under the ejector, in the breach of her gun. The result was satisfactory: the gun refused to cock.

"Is there something the matter?" asked Armstrong. A sigh had made him look at her.

"Ah, captain! . . . I am really a nuisance. I don't want to bother you, but I am afraid I must."

"Mademoiselle, am I not entirely at your service? Have you forgotten already that our host has put you specially under my care?"

"Then, as you are very accustomed to discipline, will you do as I order you?"

Her head slightly towards his shoulder, Concha gazed at him. He understood the insinuation and replied emphatically:

"Even if I had not been asked, I should have done it for the pleasure of being of service to you."

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"And also to please me?" continued Concha in her most engaging manner.

"That goes without saying! If I may hope to have the pleasure. Tell me what I can do."

"I have broken my rifle."

"But surely a rifle cannot get broken like that! You've hardly touched it."

Concha shrugged her shoulders.

"I can't think how it happened. But one thing is certain, when I open the breech I can't shut it."

"Will you allow me?" said Armstrong, taking it from her to examine it. "The catch is fixed right enough. Did you have difficulty in opening it?"

"No. It opened quite easily. Can you see anything wrong?"

As he spoke she leant over him so that he inhaled the perfume of her hair.

"It is rather difficult to see in the shade of these trees."

"Perhaps in testing it . . ." suggested Concha, eager to put her fingers in the barrels to prevent Ronald from putting his there. . . . "It seems quite right!"

"Let me look. I know something about guns. Very strange. It seems quite clear. The worst of it is the shoot is just beginning. At any moment the beaters on their elephants may drive a frightened animal towards us."

"And I shall have nothing to shoot with! Nothing to defend myself with. . . . Oh! It is very dangerous,"

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groaned Concha, clinging to the captain's shoulder like a frightened child attracted by a wolf.

Unfortunately for him, Ronald Armstrong was one of those men who is a natural protector. It was in vain that he pointed out that the peril to the trembling lady was imaginary, and that her shooting would offer next to no danger to the driven tiger. He must at all costs reassure her. He put one hand in a brotherly way on her trembling shoulder and patted her knee with the other. He could not have done it more gently if he had been soothing a baby that had just been weaned!

"Come, come, Mademoiselle Concha! Don't get upset like this! The tiger isn't going to eat you. There are other guns, remember . . . and I, I also have my rifle!"

With cleverly calculated progression, Concha entwined her limbs around those of her defender. Before the contact was complete, a deferential recoil, or maybe a false step, by the elephant threw them apart, and he had no desire for her further attractions nor suspected that she wished to offer herself to him. In order to have a pretext for prolonging the scene, Concha made her teeth chatter like castanets, not hesitating to blame herself.

"It is really silly to be so impressionable . . . to such an extent as I am. . . . I . . . I . . . I beg your pardon!"

"Please don't apologize; it is I, on the contrary, who should have done something. . . . What can I do to put you right? Ah! Let me give you a drink!"

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By accident it was Armstrong's left arm that encircled Concha. With his right hand he quickly opened a flask that he had in his pocket. Then, with the best intentions in the world, he poured down the throat of his patient a good peg of old whisky that he thought appropriate to the gravity of the situation. The cure was almost miraculous. Concha gave a loud sneeze that astonished the mahout and brought forth a peremptory "hush." It was not the moment to make a noise.

"Ah, well!" whispered the captain as he patted her hands like a good friend. "Don't you feel better now?"

"Oh!" she replied, with a tender pressure in reply to his cordial grasp. "How can I express my sense of gratitude?"

"Gratitude is a large word for a drink of whisky," he replied jokingly.

"Yes, but it is the way you did it! You were perfectly charming. I feel that this day will mark an unforgettable moment in my life. It is absolutely necessary that we become friends!"

"I shall be most honoured."

His tone of voice denoted the simple courtesy of his remark. Somewhat disappointed, Concha glanced again at her antagonist. She saw that the look in his clear blue eyes was not so naïve as she had thought. She felt that the moment had arrived for her also to pull herself together.

"Poor Captain Armstrong! What a wretched time

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you are having with my stupidity! As I am no longer any use, I will leave you to shoot by yourself and keep in my little corner."

She had hardly completed her remark when the mahout, who was sitting astride the elephant's neck, turned round sharply and whispered to Armstrong:

"Captain Sahib! . . . Look . . . a tiger . . . over there! "

Concha heard him. The mahout's warning caused her terrible alarm, which this time was not assumed. At the thought that the tiger, like a squirrel, was going to climb up the elephant's legs and devour her, she went into hysterics, whereupon she seized Armstrong by the neck just as he had picked up his rifle.

The mahout, pointing towards the tall grass, whispered:

"There! . . . There, Captain Sahib! . . . *Dekko!*"

And Concha, clinging to Armstrong, screamed:

"I'm afraid! . . . Oh, I'm afraid! Oh! My God! "

Armstrong tried to free himself. Displeased, he exclaimed:

"You are in the way of my right eye! I can't fire. Let me go! "

"No! . . . I'm afraid! . . . Don't leave me! "

She struggled. The rifle went off in the air. The amazed mahout exclaimed:

"Not in the tree, the tiger, Captain Sahib! In the long grass. . . . He's getting away! "

Concha, half dead with fright, had fallen across his

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knees as he fired his second shot and, to everyone's amusement, brought down a coco-nut from the top of a tree. By bad luck the elephant on which Kumbha Sing and the Minister of the Interior were riding came alongside Armstrong's elephant. The Maharajah's aide-de-camp shouted:

"Bravo, captain! You made a good shot at the coco-nut! "

"But what has become of Mlle. Guerrero?" asked the Minister.

The Englishman, very annoyed, pointing to the floor of the howdah, replied:

"She's down here . . . she's fainted. It isn't very amusing shooting tigers with little ladies who are frightened by a mouse! "

Two hours later the shoot was over. The bag consisted of two tigers, one killed by the Maharajah, the other by a major in the Bengal Lancers. The story went about that Armstrong had brought down two coco-nuts, but it was very soon stopped by the Minister, who blamed Kumbha Sing for making fun of the Englishman. The aide-de-camp replied:

"It is His Highness's fault for having faith in Mlle. Concha's bravery. I told her that she must overcome her nervousness and not get in the way of Armstrong's eye when he is firing. She said she would try and make up for it."

"Let's hope so."

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As a matter of fact by this time lunch was ready in the tent. Armstrong had almost forgotten his annoyances. By her amiability and her regret, Concha was forgiven for her foolishness. The Englishman was talking quite pleasantly to her. At dessert, when she begged him not to think too harshly of her and forget his spoilt day, he replied jokingly:

"Instead of having a tiger's skin, I will have my coco-nut stuffed."

A little later, in the car on their way back to the palace, Concha reported her progress to the Maharajah:

"Then you think, Concha," said the Prince, "that he is no longer annoyed with you. You must admit you were a bit of a spoil-sport."

"True, but I have noticed that some men rather like being annoyed by women. Up to now Armstrong has a bad impression of me. That will make it more easy for me to give him a better one in the future."

"Not badly argued, Concha. You are certainly an expert in man-hunting. So I have confidence in you."

A quizzical smile spread over his face. By way of encouragement, he tapped her familiarly on the cheek and concluded with:

"Go on like this, dear friend. I fancy that the pretty emeralds which tempt you are getting nearer to your neck."

XII

THE help that Father Forestier had given to Brinda had not lessened the esteem in which he was held at the palace. In order to make him forget the outrageous treatment he had received on that occasion, the Maharajah was anxious to show him renewed consideration.

Requests that he had made, and which had remained more or less in abeyance, received immediate attention. And to crown everything, he was summoned to the palace.

"Very reverend Sahib," said the Minister who received him, "my august master is very pleased with you."

"I am happy to know that I have been able to please His Highness."

"The Maharajah is anxious to know what he can do for you."

"His Highness's esteem is in itself a reward beyond my modest deserts. Whatever I have accomplished, I have merely done the duty the Lord has assigned to me. I do not expect any reward on earth."

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"We know very well, Sahib, that you have nobler aims in view than the honour of this world. But as His Highness has profited from your labours, undertaken for the love of your God, he is anxious to express his gratitude. Do you need anything for yourself?"

"The Maharajah is too kind. But I need nothing."

"We foretaw this answer," the Minister replied with a friendly smile. "His Highness deputed me to give you twenty thousand rupees for your poor. He is not making you a present. He begs you to undertake the mission it entails. You know better even than our police the needs of the poor in our capital. His Highness is sure that in handing to you this sum to distribute, you will do it with perfect discretion. He is very beholden to you."

"What I refuse for myself, I accept with pleasure for my poor. Please convey my thanks to His Highness for his generosity and the confidence which he places in me. As your respected Maharajah appreciates my conduct, tell him from me that I shall carry on in the same way in the future, and I shall ask blessings from on high for him and his people. May he live long in prosperity and peace, and may you do the same, my son!"

"May the goodness you possess, Sahib, ever remain and grow in you. That is the wish of my heart when I think of the happiness and welfare of us all."

Father Forestier retired. No one escorted him to the ministry, and no one was waiting to accompany him

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home. He was accustomed to wander freely through the palace. The servants as they passed saluted him. He was evidently a familiar figure in the place. And very often one or another paused to talk to him for a moment.

Father Forestier stopped as he met an old woman servant who seemed to be on the look-out for him. The gallery he was passing through was lit only by occasional windows, and the woman had chosen to wait in a very dark corner.

"Who are you?" he asked, for he could not distinguish who it was. "Do you want something?"

"Yes, Sahib! Your help . . ." she whispered quickly in a voice trembling with emotion.

"Danah? I hope you have not more bad news of the Princess?"

"Ah, good Sahib, if you don't do something for her, she will not be alive to-morrow morning!"

"What do you say? What is the matter with her? Who is taking care of her? If she is not properly attended, I will go and tell her father and compel him to call in the English doctors. They do not make light of illnesses."

"It is not the illness that will kill her, Sahib, but poison! Poison by her own hand. . . ."

Father Forestier was silent, struck dumb with compassion.

"She has got hold of it secretly through one of our women who, in a fit of remorse, has confessed that she

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consented to get it for the Princess," she continued in despair. "As soon as I knew about it, I threw myself at my lady's feet. I implored her not to cut short her life that, after her mother went away, I helped to nurture. She would not listen to me. I have tried everything, but I cannot find out where she has hidden the fatal draught. But I know she has it and that she means to take it. That stinking hyena of a step-mother—may vermin devour her body and devils assail her soul—has inflicted a last blow so hard that she cannot bear it. She, my Brinda, my light of purity, this infamous creature condemned to be exposed half naked on the servants' terrace, like the lowest of lewd women, until a man had seen her. So my sweet girl prefers death to life in this palace where the humblest servant takes the opportunity of treating her with contempt! I am not surprised, believe me, Sahib, but I want to save her from herself. Who knows what she is doing at this very minute! I left in order to warn you, because you are the only person who wishes her well; but perhaps she will take advantage of my absence and drink the deadly potion!"

"In that case, don't waste time here, run to your mistress. Tell her that I want to speak to her, that I will meet her this evening at night-fall in the temple of Krishna. That she is to be ready to leave the palace altogether. I think I know a way of relieving her of the Maharanee's ill-treatment!"

Hurriedly, the old woman kissed the missionary's

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cassock. Then she fled, urged on by the dread of being too late with these words of hope.

The green temple was silent. Under the arched roof a few devotees intoned their prayers to the divine Krishna. The idol of the god playing the flute and perched on five cobras' heads looked fantastic in front of the lamps, surrounded by white jasmine freshly cut. The remainder of the temple was dark and empty. With a noisy swish of their wings, a chattering colony of green parrots were preparing to roost for the night in the Dravidian carvings over the doors.

A fugitive shadow darted for an instant from a pillar, followed by other shadows: monkeys playing in the galleries of the temple whilst a yogi, a holy man, his face and body marked with ashes, was squatting immovable on the floor like a spectre quite indifferent to worldly things.

The fumes of aromatic perfumes were no more. The air was laden only with the scent of the warm earth and the foliage. In the evening breeze the forest seemed to take possession of the green temple standing amid the leafy shade. Its pillars had seen the trees and the creepers grow taller and taller.

The moonbeams, familiar visitors, shone on to the porch and between the pillars.

Two women sat down, squatting in a corner, close to each other.

"Take heart, my dove," said one of them tenderly.

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"We have been able to get out without anyone noticing us. The Father will not fail to keep this appointment!"

"I hope not! I shall hope until the dawn, and then, if he does not come, swear to me that you will let me take the poison I have brought with me!"

A figure, coming silently behind them, replied before Danah had time to answer. There was a gentle reproachfulness in the voice of Father Forestier.

"Oh, my child, why do you talk of death before having used all other means? And when you have tried everything, wait still with confidence for unlooked-for relief which may come the next day."

"Father," sobbed Brinda, as she threw herself into his open arms, "I am heartbroken. My life is finished. I can never get over the insult that has been inflicted upon me. I have been mortally wounded. I cannot bear to live. There is only one thing left for me to do—to disappear."

"You are like a withering plant. If you are taken to another climate, to genial surroundings, you will soon recover."

"Alas! After the blow the other night the hope of seeing a country that is less inhuman has vanished."

"You must not think that. I have a strong conviction that you are nearly at the end of your troubles. I know of a safe place where I can hide you whilst we arrange for you to go abroad and provide the means for you to travel."

"Father, I hardly dare to hope."

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"You are wrong. I will take you to one of my friends' houses, a kind and loyal person whose nationality guards him from the interference of the Prince's police. He need not know who you really are. I will merely tell him that you are unhappy and you beg leave to seek safety under the British flag. All that is necessary is for him to take you under his protection."

"Father, I will trust him as I trust you! I will obey you as I should like to have obeyed my father if he had loved me enough not to wish to impose his inhuman will upon me. What have I to do? "

"Say au revoir to Danah, who is going at once to the North with one of the orphans under my charge. The child is trustworthy. She is waiting with a light cart at the end of the street."

"But they will mistake this child for me and will follow her."

"I have thought of that. You can be sure that if they do she will come to no harm. It has the double advantage of misleading them for the time being and allowing Danah to say that she had left the town before you and does not know your hiding-place."

"Go, my child," said the old woman, unloosing the arm that the Princess had put round her neck. "Take notice of the venerable Sahib. You are safe with him; and as you love me, before you go, give me as a reward for my service that phial of poison that you had. You do not need it. Liberty and happiness are within your reach."

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"Give it to her," pleaded Father Forestier. "Her devotion to you deserves that you should put her mind at rest."

After a moment's hesitation, Brinda took one of the heavy wooden bracelets off her wrist.

"Here you are," she said. "It is hollow and the poison is inside."

"You are not deceiving me?"

"If you don't believe me, see for yourself. Open the catch and you will find a little cork underneath. The stopper of the receptacle containing the poison."

"Quite true!" replied the nurse.

And throwing the bracelet on the ground, she crushed it under her feet.

"Good-bye, now, and may you have a happy life!"

"Where are we going, Father?" Brinda asked when she could no longer see the departing figure of the one and only friend that her father's race had given her.

"Follow me. The moon forces us to go in the shadow. If anyone questions us, don't reply. You are a country girl whom I am taking to a situation with a friend of mine. However, if God has mercy on His humble servant, He will not put me under the necessity of lying, and will shield us from the perils of our journey. . . ."

Following Father Forestier, Brinda walked through the forest. Every rustle of the leaves made her tremble. She kept expecting to see one of the guards appear who would recognize her and take her back to the palace.

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"Father, where are you going?" she asked, no longer able to keep silence when she saw him leave the shelter of the trees for the open road.

"Don't be afraid, my child. People who go along this road will not bother about us. Besides, we are only going to cross it. Here is the wall that we must follow. A hundred yards farther on we shall find a door. A service entrance. The sentinel on duty there is a very nice man and knows me perfectly well. . . ."

"But, Father, what building is this? Look, there is a party going on!"

She pointed through the trees in the park to lighted windows. They could hear the sound of a band and the movement of a merry throng.

"Ah, yes! It is my friend Captain Armstrong's house. He is holding a reception this evening for the dignitaries of your father's palace—His Highness, Ministers, British Officials and their wives, and the new Cuban lady friend of the Maharanee. It is owing to this reception that we have been able to act with so little risk. When the master is out, the guards relax. I should be very surprised if your disappearance is discovered before morning. Follow me without fear, my dear child. You will be safe with the Viceroy's representative. No one will think of looking for you here."

XIII

CAPTAIN SPENCER of the 6th Battalion of the Gharwalais and Lieutenant O'Connor of the 2nd Battalion of the Sikhs had just escorted their respective partners back and had gone to the buffet.

"I say, O'Connor," said the captain, "our friend Armstrong is making headway. . . . He's a big success this evening."

"I don't know many Political Agents to Indian Princes who are as lucky as he is. . . . This Residence is delightful."

"And in spite of that, old boy, Armstrong wants to get a transfer."

"He has, however, a splendid berth here at Jahlpore."

"I understand that he's bored here. I'm in garrison at Lahore, and I'd willingly change places with him."

"Only the Maharajah doesn't want to part with him."

"Why does he want to go?"

"He's a bachelor. No doubt he finds it a bit dull."

"Is he longing for the 'beauties' of Calcutta?"

"Oh, no! Armstrong is not a ladies' man. I fancy women frighten him."

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"Oh!"

"He takes them too seriously."

"He has plenty of time on his hands."

"You may laugh, old sport, but he's romantic!"

"No! Really? . . . A rope ladder and a mandoline?
It takes all sorts to make a world."

"But tell me, speaking of rope ladders, do you know this Miss Concha Guerrero who's very much in evidence this evening and dances with all the suggestiveness of a nautch girl?"

O'Connor took his friend outside the door, away from indiscreet ears, and whispered:

"It is supposed that she is the Maharajah's favourite."

"Ah! really. . . . So she is there to charm His Highness. He is evidently forgetting the tenets of his religion by becoming attached to Western women."

"Oh no! You are wrong. I am led to believe that the Prince's favourite is here for the purpose of bewitching Armstrong."

"Is that so?"

"Perfectly natural! The Prince likes Armstrong. He throws him into the Cuban's open arms. Every man has his price. This one can be won over by bak-sheesh, that one with a decoration, another with an attractive woman. . . ."

Spencer laughed slyly as he lit a cigar.

"Hal! hal! This lucky Armstrong. There is a choice dessert ready for him. . . ."

There was a movement in the crowd, which stood aside

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to let a number of dazzling uniforms go by, with decorations, gold braid and shining boots: it was the officer in command of the brigade at Jahlpore and his staff. Armstrong and the Maharajah went up to this distinguished guest. The conversation continued:

"Callendar has all the luck; he was wounded in a trivial skirmish with some Bengalese Nationalists, on a day the Viceroy happened to be there!"

"A clever fellow. I bet he arranged it."

"Say what you like about him, you must admit that he is brave! I have seen him when out hunting, and he is always rather daring."

"Speaking of hunting, one of the Maharajah's aides-de-camp told me that Armstrong had made a pitiable exhibition of himself the other day. His only bag was a coco-nut!"

"Yes! But did he tell you that he had with him on the elephant that lovely lady who is dancing over there? How can you shoot with eyes like those beside you?"

"Who are you talking about? Do you mean Mlle. Guerrero? Where is she? I should like to see her."

"She is not here at the moment. But we shall come across her and I'll point her out to you."

Concha had not, as a matter of fact, disappeared. She had taken Kumbha Sing's arm and was sipping a gin and pineapple juice in the garden close by.

The relationship between Concha and the Indian was rather intimate. Both being aware of the Prince's

scheme, they felt it was useless for them to take part in the comedy. Kumbha Sing stopped Concha, who made a movement to return to the salon.

"Don't go away! We know that you are a star: it is no good pretending to be a meteor!"

"You are not very original."

"Who can hope to be a star in this old, old world? Seriously, mademoiselle, stay a moment, I have something important to tell you."

"You! What can you possibly have to tell me?"

"Believe me, for my own sake, I would soon find more than one thing, but it is a message from our master. How goes our little affair?"

"The lasso is tightening."

"Around Armstrong?"

"Of course!" said Concha with pride. "Has His Highness asked you to find out to what extent I have won his affections?"

"Yes."

"Well, I have inspired him with intense interest in me."

"We are sure of that, dear mademoiselle. . . . Only that is a little vague. . . . We want something more precise . . . some . . . some definite act . . . the immediate assurance that you have nothing more to refuse him, and that you will be able to obtain a great deal from him. It is not merely to be philanthropic and to provide a bachelor with a pretty mistress that the Maharajah has paid your travelling expenses! You have

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expressed yourself, from the moment we first met, with a freedom which gives me the right to say to you: Your flirtation need not stop for ever at sighs and evasions. Let us come to business, Mlle. Guererro, let us come to business. You are a woman of action. Prove it to us. In a short time we shall have need of the captain's co-operation in order to obtain from the Government at Delhi permission to construct an irrigation canal joining up with the Ganges. You must have your lover sufficiently under your thumb so that we shall not meet with any difficulty on his part. I can tell you that His Highness and all of us in his entourage who are aware of the delicate mission that you have undertaken, have absolute confidence in your success! "

" You flatter me extremely! "

" That was not entirely the end I had in view, but it is always pleasant to be agreeable."

" On that point we are not of the same opinion," Concha retorted, for the Indian's sarcasm annoyed her.

" If that is so, I may as well say: Hurry up and win Captain Armstrong to please me; but do it more quickly for the sake of the emeralds! "

Kumbha Sing's insolence brought forth an immediate retort.

" My dear sir, if it had been you, I should have refused to undertake the task even for the Koh-i-noor! "

And, furious, Concha turned on her heels and went back into the Residence. In spite of it all, she realized

the urgency of the aide-de-camp's warning. She tried to find Armstrong. She searched the rooms; she hung around the buffets; she asked Hiram Sing. She wandered across the illuminated lawns. All to no purpose! She could not find her host; he seemed to have disappeared.

Captain Armstrong had, as a matter of fact, left the reception rooms. His orderly had come and whispered in his ear that Father Forestier had asked to see him on an urgent personal matter.

"Where is the Father?" he asked, as he followed his faithful Perkins.

"I've shown him into the office, sir."

"Very good. You can go."

At first Armstrong did not take serious notice of the orderly's message. But he was surprised when he saw a woman dressed in black with the missionary; naturally, he did not show it.

He went up to him with outstretched hand.

"Forgive me for taking you away from your friends," said the Father, "but I have come to beg you to shelter an unhappy and persecuted person. . . ."

The captain did not conceal his curiosity. He asked in a puzzled tone of voice:

"Of whom are you speaking?"

"Of this young lady."

The Father put his hand on Brinda's veiled head.

"She is the daughter of a European mother and an Indian father," he explained. "An unfortunate child,

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nineteen years old, who is suffering on account of her parentage. I want you to take her under your protection until I am able to arrange for her departure to Europe. You will, won't you? "

"I don't see how I could possibly do otherwise, Father. She has no doubt no family who can take care of her? "

"I only know her Indian relations, and she is too European to hope for any affection from them."

"Isn't she able to seek protection publicly from the courts? "

"For various reasons it is impossible for her to think of it. The only help she can get is from me . . . and you."

"I hope I shall never be guilty of refusing any assistance that I can give. Have no fear regarding your protégée. She shall live at the Residence as long as she wishes, assured of my discretion and of that of my personnel. I presume that Mademoiselle is anxious that her stay here remains unknown to the authorities . . . the Indian authorities, I mean. For I can myself promise her every sympathy from the British authorities. Since it is you who speak for her, she must be deserving of our kindness and respect."

"I anticipated that with your usual good-heartedness you would say so, my dear friend. My little charge, who does not know how kind you are, was not so sure, and she has been trembling all the time we have been talking. So I take the opportunity of expressing to you

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all the gratitude that she feels though her distress prevents her from saying it."

"Father, don't exaggerate the importance of what I do. What I am doing for Mademoiselle is very little. I do it in all good faith. She need not hesitate to ask for anything she requires. I will give orders at once for her to be installed."

Then speaking to Brinda:

"Forgive me, mademoiselle, for not being able to attend to you personally, but I have duties this evening as master of the house which prevent me; and besides, in your interest also, I don't wish to draw attention by prolonging my absence. I will come, if I may, to see you to-morrow. And I hope you will have a good night's rest."

Brinda bowed without speaking. The officer's thoughtfulness called to her mind the kindness of her mistresses at Offreville and the warm friendship of her young companions in France. She could not have spoken without crying.

Whilst she had been sitting behind Father Forestier, she had been swathed in her shawls. When she rose, they fell in chaste folds around her, enveloping the lissom figure in hazy mystery. Her bearing and her movements had a nobility that struck the captain forcibly. He did not remember having seen such perfect grace in any Bengalese that he had met.

The guests were dancing when Armstrong returned to

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the reception rooms. To give the appearance of an attentive master of the house, he offered to dance a fox-trot with the first young girl that he came across. It happened to be Miss Betty Johnson, the fiancée of Lieutenant O'Connor. She was simple, ingenuous and without any conversational powers. Armstrong was thoroughly bored with the rhythm of "Singing in the Rain" and wished that an earthquake or a tidal wave would, then and there, annihilate the band.

Suddenly, Concha caught sight of the man she was looking for. As he was dancing, she did not bother to think any further of the reason for his disappearance. She took care to thread her way between the couples so as to be near the captain when he stopped. Betty Johnson was not a rival who would keep him very long.

Hardly was the dance over, however, when it was encored, to the great despair of Armstrong, who gratified Concha with a smile as he passed. He disappeared with the uninteresting Betty Johnson, whose legs dove-tailed with his very well, and who hung on to him like a shipwrecked woman to a life-belt.

Tortured with impatience, O'Connor watched the couple disappear, as Concha did. He was young and inclined to be jealous. He thought that the way his fiancée was dancing with her host was daring. Why did she put her cheek against her partner's face? Did she suddenly find an irresistible attraction in this handsome, moody Armstrong? Was she trying to vamp

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him, because of his superior position with this appointment as Political Agent?

The lieutenant, torn by doubts, never thought of looking for an ally in the dazzling person who, close by him, was nervously shutting and opening her blue tulle fan. It was Concha who took the initiative and saw in him a useful tool. She knocked against him and as affably as possible she replied to his apologies and stammered out:

"Thank you, sir. I shall be very pleased to dance with you."

Considering that he was in love and without experience, O'Connor was not altogether a fool. He immediately seized the opportunity and did not hesitate to look upon it as a godsend from a divinity interested in the fate of bashful lovers. He seized upon Concha as a stalking-horse, and rushed with her amongst the dancers. His movements were a little rough as he elbowed his way through the crowd.

Soon Concha and he found themselves under the yellow, red and green lights. These colours played upon the face, arms and dress of the young women. Captain Armstrong and his partner were close by. Concha had no difficulty in guiding the lieutenant towards them. She noticed with satisfaction the glaring glances that her partner gave to Betty. She need not bother as to how she would get rid of him or of the captain's uninteresting partner. The lieutenant managed to have Betty always under his eye. Concha was

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able to watch Armstrong with insistent admiration which he was not able, without being rude, to ignore.

The dance ended. O'Connor seized Betty like a tiger without Armstrong realizing what was happening. And Concha was standing in front of him saying as she raised her finger:

"I am surprised, captain, that you don't swoon with shame when you see me."

"What have I done?"

"You know!"

"Well, mademoiselle, I must be even more guilty than you think, because not only am I not swooning, but I have never even thought of doing so. However, if you will enlighten me as to why I should be reduced to such a condition, I will try and make amends as far as I am able. . . . Have you any smelling-salts handy?"

"You have been dancing with young girls. . . ."

"I admit it."

"Quite insignificant ones."

"That is so."

"And you have not deigned to ask me even once!"

"Ah, Mlle. Guerrero, do not put that down to disdain!"

"Then what must I put it down to? Affection so deep that it makes you timid?"

"I prefer that explanation. It comes nearer to the truth."

"Why does it only come nearer the truth? Do you

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think then that it would be difficult to be in love with me? ”

“It is not fair to misconstrue my words.”

“Then do you consider that I deserve to be loved by everyone except yourself? ”

“Oh, dear Mlle. Guerrero, I am not quite so stupid as that. If the question arose between us as to which of us was not worthy of the other, I should be the one! ”

“Whatever you may say it does not alter the fact that you forgot me. You have asked others to dance, but not me! I dance quite well, you know.”

“What would you do if I was ungallant enough to say that I did not believe you? ”

“I should order you to put it to the test at once.”

“Well, that is a punishment to which I have no objection. I would even tell a lie to receive it. Mlle. Guerrero, I am afraid you will suffer, but will you dance a tango with me? ”

“I will, kind sir. And so much the worse for you if I do suffer! ”

“What a child you are! ”

“Yes. There are some days when I feel like that. This evening I am six years old. And that age gives me the privilege of asking childish questions of those who have the rare gift of pleasing me. How much do you love me, captain? ”

“You know quite well that I have a real regard for you.”

“Ah! You don't know how to play! . . .” she pro-

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tested as she followed languishingly the rhythm of the tango. "The answer should be: more than gold, more than a kingdom or more than heaven."

"Well then, heaven in this case. It is the most flattering. . . ."

"If I had a fancy, would you refuse me?"

"I wonder if I should be capable. . . ."

"You mustn't joke. I am very serious: I have a fancy."

"The devil you have!"

"Don't look at me so severely or I shall not dare to tell you. . . ."

He stopped for an instant to gaze at Concha, and he saw in his mind's eye the figure of the unknown little visitor standing between him and his brilliant partner. And once there, she remained. The vision took possession of him.

He listened in a distraught manner to Concha, who begged him to invite her to dinner secretly at the Residence. He promised without thinking of what he was saying. Concha and the lights swam before him as in a hazy dream.

What grace was hidden under the black veils of the strange little person who had bowed to him without saying a word?

XIV

"Now you can go! I have important matters to settle!" the Maharajah had declared to his servants who had been helping him to dress that morning.

They retired, leaving their sovereign to daily reflections. During this time the Prime Minister himself would not have dared to interrupt him.

This important moment was later than usual to-day. The Prince had stayed till dawn at the fête at the English Residency. He had "the morning after" feeling—he was heavy and tired, consequently he desired to be left in peace, and his entourage respected his wish.

Alone, his first thought was to carry into the bath-room his breakfast that he was supposed to eat as he pondered over the affairs of State. Then he got rid of the cream, the sops and the cakes which constitute the morning meal of an Indian of high caste. And having in that way sacrificed to the susceptibilities of his cooks, he placed his chair in front of a cabinet and pressed the secret spring that he alone knew.

The front flap of the cabinet automatically fell and

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crunching one of his biscuits and spluttering to give vent to his indignation whilst his mouth was full.

"The Maharanee begs Your Highness to forgive her for the great liberty that she has been compelled to take. She throws herself at your feet and orders me to assure you that she has never been your more humble . . ."

"That will do!" the Maharajah cut in, his voice still severe. "Say what you have to say and leave me in peace."

"It is that Her Highness wishes me to say that she desires to give you her message herself!"

"Does this woman, deep as a well, imagine that I am going to put myself out at this time of the day for her? My affairs will not wait!" he concluded, realizing that his tea was beginning to get cold.

"Alas, Your Highness, my mistress insisted that I must not go back to her without bringing you with me."

"Very well, I'll come! I hope, for the Maharanee's sake, that the news she has for me is of vital importance—if not. . . !"

With a rattle of crockery, that was very alarming for the unhappy Mirra to whom the mission had been entrusted, being ignorant of what was happening, the Maharajah shut up the cabinet with the biscuits covered with marmalade and the tea which was now undrinkable.

"I am afraid that Your Highness will only think the news too grave when he knows it! . . ." Mirra stammered, plucking up all her courage.

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formed a very convenient table. The interior contained an electric kettle, a teapot, a box of biscuits and pots of jam and marmalade. He filled the kettle, switched on the heater and waited patiently for the water to boil. When it did so, he made the tea in a teapot he had brought from Oxford and, whilst waiting for it to draw, he spread marmalade on his biscuits.

That was the way, under the excuse of considering important questions of State, that he was able to indulge in a thoroughly British breakfast. He never confessed this vice to anyone. And the precautions that he had taken had so far prevented his secret from becoming known.

With a contented smile the Maharajah was looking at his tea when with a sudden gesture of annoyance he unfortunately upset half of it on the table.

"Who dares to interrupt me when I am at work?" he shouted, as he mopped up the liquid with the silk of his turban, the first thing that came to hand.

The knocking at the door ceased, as if his remark had crushed the disturber of his peace.

"Well! Answer me at once. Do you hear what I say? Who is the mongrel who dares to disturb me at this time?"

A small voice replied:

"I have come from the Maharance. . . ."

"Has a mad spider bitten the Princess that she takes the liberty of sending to me at such an unsuitable moment?" he muttered, unable to resist the pleasure of

crunching one of his biscuits and spluttering to give vent to his indignation whilst his mouth was full.

"The Maharanee begs Your Highness to forgive her for the great liberty that she has been compelled to take. She throws herself at your feet and orders me to assure you that she has never been your more humble . . ."

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She had indeed shown a certain amount of bravery, for the Maharajah, putting on his turban, looked furious.

"That will do!" he hissed, going on before her, making his way to the zenana with rapid strides.

Slave to her master as she pretended to be, the Maharanee was not wanting in a certain amount of tactical skill in creating one scene to avoid another. The arrival of the Prince in her apartments brought her face to face with the necessity of anticipating his reproaches. Not daring to direct her efforts upon her husband, she sought to attain her object by a ricochet method, hurling the imprecations, which ought to have been aimed at him, upon Mirra.

"Is this the way, you good-for-nothing woman, that you carry out my orders? You know very well that a disaster that needs immediate attention afflicts your sovereign and you dawdle over it! If you had conveyed my message to the Prince with the celerity that you ought to have done, he would not have been so long in coming. And this delay may be most detrimental! I beg Your Highness will pardon this legitimate outburst of anger," she said, turning to her husband. "I wanted to tell you that Brinda, that disgraceful girl, has disappeared from the palace. You see, the news should not be delayed."

In an instant, the Prince's anger turned upon Brinda.

"This ruthless girl will carry things to such a pitch that Prince Keshab Sandra will end by not wanting her.

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The merits of her father will not be sufficient to outweigh the scandalous behaviour of the child! How is it that you have heard of this deplorable affair before me? ”

“ The women’s apartments are under my care. I have my special police.”

“ Oh! You have special police! I congratulate you. They are very capable, aren’t they? But they are not capable of preventing a girl from escaping, and are only useful for telling you that the scandalous event has taken place! ”

“ I don’t think Your Highness has much to reproach my police with,” retorted the Maharanee acidly, “ they do their work better than yours! At any rate, I have been told of the disappearance of your daughter, and you, you know nothing about it! ”

“ Is it really true? I do not trust this idle chatter! This fool of a girl is perhaps crying in some quiet corner. I will have the palace searched.”

“ Very well! ” said the Maharanee in a bantering tone, standing between her husband and the door. “ Give the alarm to the guard and the menservants! Publish the fact to the world that you have lost your daughter and Prince Keshab Sandra will soon get to hear that he has a fiancée who runs the streets like a mad woman! ”

“ By all the metamorphoses of Brahma, what do you expect me to do? ”

“ Seek for her in secret and, until she has been found,

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pretend that she is there all the time. And I may tell you also that her nurse has disappeared as well."

"What a state of affairs! What a situation!" the Prince lamented, his want of breakfast having robbed him of all self-control. "So you advise me to make a secret search? And who do you suggest that I shall depute to do it?"

"How should I know? Haven't you a Minister of the Interior?"

"Yes, you are right. Hiram Sing is very circumspect."

"Why not depute him? He must know many other things about you that are compromising to Your Highness."

"Umph!" he growled, for he did not like his wife interfering with his diplomatic intrigues. "I congratulate you on the good advice you have given me. I will tell him to solve the mystery."

Then, as it was not convenient to him to interview his Minister in his wife's apartments, he summoned him to an audience in those of Mlle. Guerrero. It was the first time that he had gone there since he had installed her in the palace.

"How fortunate I am to receive a visit from Your Highness!" exclaimed Concha, reclining on her cushions. "I did not expect this honour without being prepared to receive you."

"Don't trouble about that, my radiant lady," replied His Highness as he sat down. "Why, you have

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not yet taken your breakfast? Will you permit me to share it with you? I am dying of hunger, I assure you. I have just had a considerable amount of annoyance."

"Regarding Armstrong, I suppose?"

"No! No! I am not able, alas, to think about him alone."

"For, you know, yesterday things went very well between us."

"I am glad. . . . But about the toast," continued His Highness, still deep in thought. "May I have some?"

"What do you say? . . . Oh yes, please help yourself. How delightful for me to breakfast with you. I am going to have supper with Armstrong before the end of the week. . . ."

"Oh, that's splendid. . . . Enough butter, thank you. I hope you will not mind if I receive my Minister in your rooms?"

"Not at all. Please send for him."

"Oh! I have already done so. I mentioned it so that you would not be surprised at seeing him come in."

"Your Highness, I appreciate your thoughtfulness! But I wondered if I ought to receive the Hon. Hiram Sing in such a negligée attire. This apartment, after all, is mine, and I am the person to say who ought and who ought not to come into it."

The Maharajah squinted as he looked at Concha over his cup of tea. Her annoyance was so obvious that it inspired him with respect for her.

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"May I point out that Hiram Sing is uglier than a squad of monkeys? He is a man who pays no attention to women, my dear. Especially now he is growing old. You might receive him unclothed and he would not have a thought that would trouble you. He only thinks of his work."

"Then he is a man who deserves all my sympathy."

"I knew you would understand. Come in," the Prince called out, seeing his Minister enter hesitatingly behind an Indian servant. "I was telling Mlle. Guerrero what confidence she can place in you."

"My master pays me a double honour by praising me in my absence!" said the Hon. Hiram Sing, bowing very low. "Ought I," he added, "to gather from this summoning by Your Highness that he has been informed concerning . . ."

"So you know, as well!" shouted the Maharajah. "Then I am the only person in the palace who did not know."

"Then has something serious taken place?" Concha asked eagerly.

"Tell Mlle. Guerrero," the Maharajah commanded, "since you know what has happened."

"The Princess Brinda escaped last night!" the Minister announced with all the diffidence that the news called for.

"Let her go her own way, as she causes difficulties and annoyances to your wife!" Concha suggested as she pulled around her her rose-coloured dressing-gown

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which was allowing a little too much of her shoulders to be exposed.

"Excuse me, but I have need of her. I rely on marrying her in order to cement an alliance which I desire very much."

"That alters the case. Send the town-crier after her. Or put up a notice offering a reward of fifty thousand rupees to anyone who will bring her back. . . . Like one does for a lost fox-terrier."

"That is not a bad idea," remarked the Minister.

"And the fiancé? You don't think he will find it a little distasteful?" exclaimed the Maharajah. "A young girl who ought not, on principle, to go out of the zenana!"

"My God! You men here make things very complicated!" Concha remarked disapprovingly.

"You are fortunate that yours are more easy-going."

"What do you mean to insinuate by that?" she said, pushing aside her breakfast plate.

Concha, furious, intended to benefit in secret from the advantages of a bad reputation, whilst profiting in public from outward marks of respect. So she would not joke on that subject.

"My God! dear Concha," said the Maharajah apologetically, "it was merely that the suggestion was so absurd and the moments are too precious to waste in idle discussions. My daughter is lost, she must be found without the affair becoming public. . . . You are a woman of experience and intelligence. I sent for

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Hiram Sing so that both of you might give me your advice. I am waiting for it."

"I only see one thing to do," suggested the Minister. "Since we are not able to say that we are searching for the Princess, let us pretend we are searching for someone else. The Princess cannot be far away; in the course of our inquiries we shall be sure to come across her."

"Very true!"

"I am glad that Mlle. Guerrero agrees. Whom shall I say that we are looking for?"

"A dangerous traitor who is dressed like a woman!" Concha suggested, for after having been included in the consultation, she had become better tempered.

"Search for the traitor," the Maharajah agreed. "Leave no stone unturned to find him, Hiram."

"I will telegraph instantly, if Your Highness will allow me, to every police station in the district telling them to inform me at once of all travellers, male and female, passing through their district. If Your Highness is staying with Mlle. Guerrero for a few minutes, I will come back and let you know what replies I receive."

"Very well!" Concha replied. "Will you allow me, my august friend, to offer you a fresh cup of tea? In my excitement just now I upset yours. . . ."

"No, my dear beauty, no matter. I renounce breakfast to-day. There are days when one is not lucky. To-day is one of them!"

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"Your Highness must not be downcast. The end of the day will come and your sad forebodings will vanish. I reminded you of my anger a moment ago: let me explain the cause. Let us understand one another. I am rendering you a rather delicate service about which we have agreed. However, I expect it to be clearly understood that I do it solely and entirely to oblige you, for I have a very kindly feeling towards you. But it must not be allowed to throw the slightest discredit upon me personally!"

"Who would dare to say anything derogatory about you? If there is anyone, let him be disgraced and despised, and may his malice turn upon him and rend him."

"Well, Your Highness, someone has dared. As it is a person whose duties bring him in close contact with Your Highness, I was afraid that the view of this personage was the same as Your Highness's. That was the reason I suspected, just now, an intention to gibe at an undertaking without an evil thought. And I have been pained and grieved to the depths of my soul."

"I am not less so when I learn that someone in my house has been failing in the respect that he owes to you. Name this impertinent fellow and I will let him know my displeasure."

"It is Kumbha Sing, your aide-de-camp," said Concha with a feeling of intense delight, for it is always trying to live with a desire for vengeance unsatisfied.

"It is unpardonable!" replied the Maharajah indignantly. "I will reprimand him as soon as Hiram Sing returns."

"Perhaps I ought not to have told Your Highness!" Concha observed, giving herself the luxury of being larger hearted at a very small cost.

"No! I know about it and I shall not forget it."

Concha had just made this disclosure when Hiram came back saying that he had been in communication with a police station fifty miles north of the palace which had informed him that a light cart with two women in it, one a young one whom it was impossible to recognize as she was veiled, the other an elderly person whose description tallied with that of Brinda's nurse.

"Order a car and go and find out," commanded the Maharajah.

Some hours later, Hiram Sing returned with Danah. After a long inquiry, it was discovered that she did not know where her mistress was hiding. Thereupon the Maharajah ordered all the houses in the capital to be searched—every hole and corner. The result was a blank. Brinda was not there.

As the Princess had not left the town, and as she had not taken refuge with the inhabitants, there was only one place where one could expect to find her—the Residence of the English Political Agent. The Maharajah's police, however, dare not cross the threshold.

"Very well! I will see to that," said Concha when

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she knew what had happened and the difficulties of the case. "If the Princess is hiding there, I know how to get her out!"

In spite of the fact that one may fill an important position and have titles, medals and ribbons, one does not lose that childish love of mystery. The knowledge that he had in his house a veiled young girl had prevented Armstrong from sleeping.

"This young woman is no doubt just like any other," he said to himself, and, to banish her from his thoughts, in his mind's eye he tried to imagine on the shoulders of this unknown lady one of the faces of his guests of the night before. None of them pleased him. He wanted more innocence than Concha, more intelligence than Betty, more tenderness than Mrs. Spencer, and more charm and beauty than any of them.

"I am not a fool," he ended up by saying to himself as he threw away the end of his last cigarette. "She probably has a little nose without personality, two large eyes, a heavy mouth and a muddy complexion. Even if she were more ugly than that it would make no difference. . . . I will find out who she is as soon as I can!"

To mark the fact that the time for dreaming was past, he pushed back the shutters. The day was dawning. He rang for his orderly. He did not mean to waste a minute, for he had lost a few hours in sleep.

Instead of taking his bath and his morning ride, he

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began by asking whether his visitor had had all she needed.

His restlessness put him in a bad humour until three o'clock. Then he determined to go and see his protégée, as the most elementary courtesy demanded.

He found her closely veiled. When he was announced Brinda drew her sari over her face with a gesture that was not the outcome of modesty.

Being hidden, it seemed to be easier for her to express her gratitude to Ronald Armstrong. She threw herself on her knees at his feet.

"I beg you, mademoiselle!" he protested. "You make me feel quite embarrassed."

"Why should you feel embarrassed? You have no reason to be. I am, because I do not know how to thank you for your kindness."

"Mademoiselle, I beg you, get up at once, if you wish to please me. I have only done my duty in taking you in. Look on me simply as a friend."

"That will be very easy, I think."

"Good, that is nice of you," he said, offering her his hand. "Come and sit here, will you, and let us talk, unless I am indiscreet in wishing to know you a little."

"I'm afraid my life is very uninteresting and you would only be disappointed. Up till quite recently I have lived a studious existence at a boarding school."

"A boarding school here in India?"

"No, at Offreville in France. I promise you that that does not lend itself to any great mystery."

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"Well! To see you veiled one would not think it! You were not veiled when you were there?"

"No. I lived like all my European friends. This custom has been forced upon me since I came back here."

"Don't you dislike it? . . . Yes? . . . Tell me the truth. You are tired of it. I, too, am sorry for you. I think it is inhuman—humiliating for the woman and hateful to the man."

"I hope, captain," said Brinda, very upset, "I have not offended you by being veiled in your presence?"

Armstrong gave a kindly smile, hesitated, then:

"Yes, a little, I admit it. It makes me think that you distrust me."

"If I pulled aside my sari, would that please you?"

"I did not dare to ask this proof of your confidence. I do not know what forced you from your home, your Indian blood or your European. . . ."

"My European, captain!" Brinda replied so emphatically that the captain smiled. "Besides, you see . . ."

Roguishly, as she used to do to the new girls at Mme. de Vicelles, when she asked them to guess her nationality, hidden by a serviette, she lifted her sari just enough to show her eyes.

"Oh!" exclaimed Armstrong. "I have never seen such blue eyes! . . . Nor so beautiful, nor so soft," he added in a low voice.

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Brinda could hardly refrain from laughing at the ingenuousness of his admiration.

"Then there is no need for me to show you the rest of my face?" she said playfully. "I may perhaps be very ugly."

"With such a look and with such a voice I should like to win your friendship. Take off your veil, or keep it on, it does not matter. However, as you are a European, that veil gives the effect of a disguise, so I should think you more trustful if you took it off."

At once Brinda undid the pins which held it.

Armstrong looked at her fascinated. The face which she revealed he recognized. It was that of the young woman in the pillory whose cruel suffering had grieved him so much. In the first moment of astonishment he exclaimed:

"But, my dear child, I have seen you before!"

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HE did not say anything more—Brinda had understood. She uttered a cry of distress and, putting up her hands, buried her face in the cushions of the settee.

Armstrong at once regretted his brutal frankness. His elbows on his knees, his chin in his hands, he gazed at her and wondered how he could console her. He remembered the tears streaming from her closed eyes when she was in the pillory, and thought there was no doubt that she was weeping again in recalling this terrible recollection. He called to mind the touching lines of the greatest Hindu poet of the seventeenth century, Mirza Abdul Kadir Bidill, who wrote: *The sobs of the heart are not heard.*

Then he called her by the name that he had heard Father Forestier use.

“Mademoiselle Brinda,” he said in a sympathetic tone. “You must listen to me. You must let me talk to you as though I were a relation who has your honour and your happiness at heart. You must not let yourself be overcome with shame . . . you have done nothing to cause it.”

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"Ah, God, no! It was not my fault."

"I was sure of that, even when I knew nothing about you."

"It was my step-mother who inflicted that punishment. She hates me and does everything she can to torture me."

In her anxiety to justify herself, she had sat up.

"Don't look at me, captain. Turn your eyes elsewhere. I could not bear to meet them. I will tell you the horrible story. . . . I live at the Maharajah's house. My father is a Hindu of high caste. My mother is a European. She disappeared, leaving a daughter too white and too broadminded to be loved here. Until a month or two ago, my father let me live a European life to which I was born. He flattered himself that India could reclaim me, as the forest reconquers the plain that has ceased to be cultivated. That for me was impossible. My resistance was overcome. I was treated worse than a sudra. When I did not acknowledge them as my own people, I had no nationality, no country, no religion. My European blood is never forgotten and is always thrown in my face at every opportunity. It was on account of my going alone and unveiled to seek a little quiet in the temple of Siva that I was punished in the way you know. 'Why did it happen that you should come along the road? You, whom I should have welcomed as a friend!'"

"And why should I not be?" Ronald protested, looking down on the ground.

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"With this humiliating incident between us? Oh! . . ."

"Perhaps because I am a man I refuse to take things from the same point of view as you do! There can only be humiliation, as I see it, in culpable actions committed by one's own will. . . . Well, your modesty cannot be suffering from self-reproach! I understand that you have suffered from injustice. I do not see why you should blush simply because it happened to be me. . . . You surely do not think me vile enough to have felt anything but pity for the outrage that has been put upon you?"

"No!" she exclaimed. . . . "That I do not believe."

"Then look at me, I beg you. Give me your hand. . . . Continue to trust me as you did just now. Smile to show that you will. Promise me that I shall never see you sad and frightened at me as if I were a terrible monster ready to take advantage of your defencelessness."

Brinda was taken aback at his forcible manner.

"I promise you," she said with a timid smile, her eyes still full of tears.

"And we will both forget this miserable incident," Armstrong continued, holding more tightly the hands that she had abandoned to him. "All that we will think about now is that you, poor child, must be released at once from the wretched people who are oppressing you!"

Brinda nodded in acquiescence.

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"Above everything, hide me carefully! So that no one, not even a European, may suspect you have a new-comer in your house! My parents would very soon find me here and drag me back again! "

"You can rely upon me! When your relations get wind of it and send the Maharajah to me here at the Residence, he will only go into the rooms I choose, and I shall not bring him into your room."

"What confidence you give me! When I listen to you all my fears seem to be needless. I am grateful to Father Forestier for bringing me here. Now that you are both protecting me, I feel quite safe."

"I guarantee that, dear Brinda! " he replied, more touched than he cared to show by her entire trust in him.

"I must reach Europe at all costs," she insisted. "For if my people in the palace get me again, it will mean my death! If it had not been for Father Forestier I should have been killed yesterday. Just think of it, they want to force an Indian marriage on me! "

"It is intolerable! " he said, giving the impression that it was as terrible to him as to Brinda herself. "As long as I am here it shall not happen! I say so deliberately. Tell me, will you, who are your parents, so that I can make them regret the indignities they have put upon you! "

"It would be wiser not to say, I think. It would only embarrass you if you knew."

"Well, you will write to me from Europe! Don't

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forget that even Indian nobles are responsible to us for the way in which they treat their people. Sometimes they seem to forget. And I may have to remind them of it."

"Alas!" she said with a sorrowful look on her face, "when I get to Europe, will you care who I am? You will simply remember me as a frightened little person dressed in black who came one night and threw herself on your mercy."

He looked at her for some time without replying. Her hands crossed upon her knees, her lips trembling, she was on the point of weeping again; her sad eyes betraying her grief.

"Why do you say that?" he asked her sharply.

"Because I know only too well that I am of little importance in the life of a distinguished officer like yourself. You are interested in me because you are kind-hearted; but when I am far away you will have other things to occupy you and you will forget the outcast whom you helped!"

"And . . . this thought, does it affect you?" he inquired, anxious to hear her admit it.

"Oh! how could it be otherwise? It is so pleasant to be missed—because, for that to happen, there must be a little touch of affection!"

"Brinda! . . . You could not have given me a more delightful answer! If you had said anything else I should have been unhappy! You seemed so anxious to get away from me that I thought you had no tender

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feelings towards your defender. And that made me very sad, because I also have a weakness—I like to be missed.”

“If that is your only fear, you may certainly feel very happy.”

Forcing his point with a smile, he continued:

“Will you miss me quite a lot? Will you say every day: ‘Ah! that happy time when I stayed in the little room at Armstrong’s. He was a kind man, a little clumsy with women, but very good-hearted all the same!’”

He got up to go away. Although she was tall, as she stood near him she had to look up to him.

“I will say it every day, and not once only. I promise that without any fear of breaking my word.”

Then she added in a soft voice:

“It is very nice, isn’t it, captain, that we have become friends so soon?”

“Yes. Indeed it is!”

He tried to say it in a diplomatic way which would not disclose prematurely the great attraction that he felt for her. Although he would have much preferred to press a kiss upon her lips, he contented himself with pressing her hand for a long time.

“I should like to stay with you, but I have my daily duties to perform. So that you may not be too bored, I will fetch you some magazines and the gramophone.”

“Thank you a thousand times. I shall be able to

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imagine myself at Mme. de Vicelle's and fancy that my friend Irene every now and then is coming and knocking at my door."

"You shall have a caller here also. But it will not be your little friend Irene, it will be your big friend Ronald."

"That would be just as nice! . . ." she said without any thought of flirtation.

Ronald's vanity was touched. He left her, deciding to let her see that in future no one in the world could be more precious to him than she was.

Ingenuously inciting him to win her, she had just employed the infallible means that every woman possesses to conquer men.

Brinda still stayed on at Armstrong's house. The watchfulness of the police since her disappearance forced Father Forestier to be very circumspect in arranging for her departure to Europe. The captain also was doing all he could. The attraction that he felt for her grew stronger every day. Every moment he had to spare he spent with her. Without feeling quite sure, he thought he had made some little impression, and that he began to count in her life. In thinking about it he experienced a calm and contented feeling that was new; it led him to revel in the dawn of love rather than hasten to win a definite victory.

His secret happiness made him indulgent, anxious to spread happiness around him.

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Concha, who since the day after the ball worried him to settle upon a definite date for her invitation to dinner that she had forced from him that evening, took advantage of his kindly disposition.

Hanging on to his arm, she kept lamenting about her life in the palace:

"The meals that I eat alone—the monotony and the ennui are almost unbearable. It would be an act of charity, captain, not to delay your invitation too long. If your cook is still indisposed as you have told me, if the wine you have ordered from Calcutta does not come soon, you will not have me as a guest. I shall perish from boredom. Why, alas! did I solemnly promise my old friend the Maharajah to stay with him several weeks longer? If you don't lighten my calvary I shall be a lost woman! . . ."

Armstrong had some news which he wanted to tell Brinda. In order to get rid of Concha, he said he would see her the same evening.

He was annoyed that he had to do so, for it prevented him from spending the evening with his little friend, unless he could pack Concha off post haste and Brinda would wait until he had finished with her to give him a few minutes' chat.

Generally, the Princess watched for him at her window behind the wire blind that kept out the mosquitoes. Ronald did not see her as usual at her observation post.

"That confounded Guerrero has kept me longer than

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I thought," he grumbled. "Brinda is tired of waiting. I hope she is not angry with me on account of this woman, and has not minded waiting for me again this evening."

His heart beating with anxiety, he hurried to her room. He found her swathed in a large white sheet and very surprised to see him. The vision cheered him up.

"Are you playing at being a bride?" he asked. "My sister Cynthia did that when we were children. She used a window curtain for a veil. Take my arm. I make no secret of it, in that instance I was the bridegroom and I don't mean to miss the chance this time."

"Good heavens!" said Brinda, half angry, half amused. "How you love to tease me! I was not trying to make a wedding gown, but just an ordinary dress so as not to appear always in my black servant's sari. I've had dresses from the rue de la Paix very like this. Sometimes they were successes, sometimes they were failures. Anyway, I have not achieved the success I hoped for, in spite of the trouble I have taken."

"And have you really taken all this trouble to please me?"

"I don't wish to appear a fright to you!" replied Brinda, looking at a rose in the pattern of the carpet. . . . "All young girls like pretty dresses. Your sister Cynthia whom you spoke of just now, didn't she like them?"

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"Yes, tremendously! I tremble to think of the number of dressmakers that you will go to when you live with her."

"When I live with her?" she repeated, forgetting, in her surprise, to evade his eyes as he held her arm. "What do you mean?"

"Why, where do you think I am sending you to, in Europe, if not to my people? I wrote to them by yesterday's mail to tell them to be ready to receive a very dear friend of mine, and, if all goes well, as I hope it will, the next boat from India will take this precious friend to them."

"Oh, Ronald! How good you are! I shall love them all for your sake."

In a burst of gratitude Brinda bent over Armstrong's hand to kiss it, but he drew it away and slid it around her waist; and with his other drew her head to him. In a sudden transport of delight she sank upon his shoulder.

"I will save you, Brinda," he whispered. "All that I can do to make you happy I swear I will do with all my heart."

She wanted to raise her head to tell him that she trusted him. Her forehead touched his lips. They pressed her eyelids, then her cheeks. When Ronald touched her mouth, her lips parted the better to receive his kiss.

In their happiness space and time were forgotten. To support Brinda, Ronald held her more tightly. They

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clung to each other more closely, lost in the Nirvana of this revelation. By degrees she came back to the realities of life with the amazement that one experiences after a long absence at finding familiar things so changed. Love, in revealing itself to her, had caused her to pass almost brutally from the most abject helplessness to happiness so complete that she was frightened at it and could not believe it to be true. She exclaimed:

"Ronald!" just as though she were calling "Help!"

He wished to press her to him. She drew away.

"Leave me. . . . I should like to be alone now. I want to think. . . ."

"You are not angry with me?" he asked. "You will let me come and see you again this evening?"

She said "Yes," but made him go away before he was able to tell her that a tiresome visitor would prevent him from coming at the usual time.

Sitting facing Captain Armstrong, Concha was trying to make him intoxicated. She was not relying merely on her charms.

"Captain, you are drinking nothing! . . . Have some more of this Haut-Barzac as I am doing. Your glass is nearly empty: you cannot drink to our mutual good luck! Here you are! Here's to the success of your regiment. Let me fill your glass!

"Now, here's to the King! At any rate you can't refuse *that* toast."

"Perhaps," he replied pleasantly, hiding his im-

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patience under a cloak of extreme courtesy, " but I hope I am able to show my loyalty in other ways besides that."

" Yes, but not when I ask you. You cannot refuse me? I feel so happy when I am with you! "

" Is life then so dull for you in the palace? "

" Since you ask me such an impudent question, one might imagine you thought I only took an interest in you as a last resource! "

" My modesty, dear mademoiselle, does not allow me to think otherwise."

" Cruel, callous wretch! " she exclaimed in a tone of deep despair.

Then she burst into laughter and commanded:

" Drink this glass. You will have it on your conscience if you refuse to drink to royalty! "

Armstrong yielded.

He hurried the dinner as much as her whimsical behaviour would allow. For she assumed an air of gaiety and kept asking absurd questions in order to lengthen out the meal. Under her half-closed lids, as if she were slightly intoxicated, she was watching the effect she was making on Armstrong and the servant who was waiting on them. But her sly little tricks made no impression on Armstrong's stolid nature or the marked indifference of the Indian *maitre d'hôtel*.

So she exaggerated still more her extravagant behaviour in order to excuse the indiscreet demands that she meant to make.

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"Open your mouth, captain," she said. "I want to throw some raisins into it!"

Roaring with laughter, she proceeded to throw them, hitting his nose, his hair and his neck.

"How clumsy you are!" she chuckled. "Can you catch this little kiss better?"

With her lips she made the sound of a kiss.

"Well?"

"I did not get it, my dear friend!" he replied in a bored tone of voice.

This was the climax of the comedy. Concha had difficulty in swallowing the rebuff.

"Take care!" she threatened. "If you don't mind, you'll make me cry! You don't know how sensitive I am. If you say nasty things to me this evening you may make me ill so that I shall have to stay here. And you will have to nurse me."

She had drunk so much in trying to make him drink that this time he began to take her seriously. He consented to catch some raisins and then persuaded her to come into the drawing-room.

"Dear captain," she murmured, continuing to pretend to be intoxicated, "the walls of your room are unbearable. Look! Look! They are wobbling!"

"I am afraid it is an optical delusion on your part."

"No, I'm sure they are wobbling! Let us get out."

"Would you like to come into my office?"

"Yes. I should like to see your office!"

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It was a sombre room and Concha very soon saw all she wanted.

"I can't stay here any longer," she said in a tone of disgust. "These walls wobble too. Take me somewhere else."

"I am afraid," he replied, "that is a little difficult. My rooms do not extend throughout the Residence. Beyond the drawing-room and my office I have only my bedroom! "

"Your bedroom! . . . But that doesn't matter. Show it to me at once or I shall faint."

XVI

THIS threat was too much for Armstrong. He would do anything rather than risk the chance of Concha having a fit of hysterics. She began to breathe heavily. She said that the air was fresher and that walls did not wobble so much. She wandered round his bedroom, opened the drawers, turned over the papers on his table, admired the ornaments, peeped into the cupboards, in fact scrutinized everything like a detective or an inquisitive child.

"I am sure you have a little blue flower, captain!" she said. "Won't you show it to me?"

"What a funny idea!"

"Yes. I want to see your little blue flower. I'm told that every Britisher has one."

"I think someone must have been pulling your leg or was speaking figuratively. . . ."

"No! No! He was quite serious. Why won't you show me yours?"

"Because I don't possess this rare flower!" said Armstrong, laughing. "Look! Search where you like!"

His secrets were in a safe place, and Concha's most indiscreet investigations would not unearth them.

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Not finding anything, she changed her tactics. She sat on his camp bed.

"If you have not the little blue flower to show me, you must have some photographs. I want to see them. They will interest me. . . ."

"There is my mother!" he said politely, handing her a framed photograph that she had picked up several times. "And here is my sister Cynthia and my young brother Edward."

"But where is your wife?"

"I am a bachelor."

"Then where is the picture of your fiancée?"

"I have no fiancée!"

"You are not entertaining, you know," she protested in a tired voice.

Then suddenly, as if she had made a sensational discovery, she inquired:

"Hallo! . . . Why have you three doors to your room?"

"As I had not the pleasure of knowing the architect of the house, I cannot tell you the object of his design. He did it for some good reason no doubt!"

"That is no answer. There are doors because they lead somewhere."

"I bow to the logic of your reasoning. And as I don't wish to hide anything from you, one leads to my office, another to my bathroom and the third to a corridor."

"Ah! to a corridor? I love corridors. What is there there?"

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"More doors. . . ."

Concha thought she was gaining her point.

"More doors? They must lead to the other rooms. I should like to go there."

"You can take my word for it," said Armstrong firmly. "You need not worry. They are visitors' rooms and are almost empty. There is nothing to see."

"I should like to go all the same!"

"Listen, my dear Concha. . . ." he said, exercising patience that was just his natural politeness. "You are very kind, but I cannot spend my evening following you all over the Residence. For I have a cellar and an attic which I expect at any moment you will want to visit. If you want a walk, come into the garden."

"As you like," she replied tamely.

She thought it was useless to insist any further. If she could not find out definitely whether Brinda, as she supposed, was occupying one of those mysterious visitors' rooms, she would have recourse to some trick to force the captain to put her up. Surely the man was an ordinary individual! She felt certain she could lead him to beg her to stay.

Thinking she was intoxicated, he took her arm to help her down the steps of the terrace. Far from resenting it, she hung closely to him. The modest behaviour on the day of the tiger hunt was no longer in evidence. She must overcome his scruples at all costs.

With cat-like movements she pressed against him at each step. Her shoulder rubbed against his. Without

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saying a word she walked slowly, leaning on him like a happy lover. He prudently respected her silence.

The rising moon shed its fairy shimmer over the scene. Its pale rays threw a silver light upon the grass and made the rose bushes stand out in heavy relief. Shining through the trellis-work of the pergola, it cast patterns on the marble pavement at their feet. Further on, its light transformed the sanded paths to rich gold. The air, soft and warm, was laden with the perfume of the flowers.

Ronald longed for Brinda to be there to share with him this hour so suitable to love, to enjoy with her the romantic languor of this entrancing Indian night.

Concha's voice brought him back to reality.

"I am sorry, captain. I am afraid I was impossible just now!"

"No! . . . No! . . ."

"You admit it by your politeness. You have let me drink too much. I fancy you have slyly tried to make me intoxicated."

"What good would that have been to me?"

"How innocent you are!" she murmured, giving him a brazen glance that spoke volumes.

"I assure you, dear friend, that such a thought never crossed my mind."

"Take care! I begin to think you are insulting!"

"You mistake my meaning. I was merely expressing my great respect for you."

"But there are some cases," she replied with a little

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laugh, "where too great respect becomes a serious offence. Aren't I beautiful enough?"

"Oh yes!"

"You do not think me very pretty?"

"Very pretty," he admitted with truth.

"So?"

Suddenly she stopped to turn to him. As Armstrong continued to walk on, she deliberately threw herself into his arms.

"Excuse me," he said, shrinking back.

"How harsh you are!"

"I might have had the misfortune to hurt you."

"Don't play the imbecile!" she retorted, annoyed at his coldness.

"That is not very polite, Mlle. Guerrero. . . . And just as my servant is coming; what will he think if he hears you quarrelling with me? He might think my life was in danger and feel that it was his duty to have you turned out by the guard!"

"Surely! You could not allow that!" she retorted tragically.

"It might happen!" he said under his breath. And then in an ordinary voice to his servant: "You want me for anything, Jeffrey?"

"A letter from the Maharajah for you, sir. . . . The bearer said that His Highness wished you to have it at once, sir. So I took the liberty of . . ."

"Quite right. Will you please excuse me, mademoiselle, whilst I see what it is about?"

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"Oh, of course, certainly!"

And without troubling what Jeffrey or his master would think, she stood at his shoulder ready to find out its contents.

"I will read it out aloud to you," he said obligingly. "That will save you the trouble of deciphering the handwriting in this bad light."

"Thank you, but don't bother, I read quite easily," she replied with a laugh.

And putting her hand on his shoulder, she pressed her cheek against his arm.

"Is it an invitation to a wild beast fight which is to be given in your honour in the moat near the old fort? What a lucky man you are. The Maharajah is anxious to entertain you in the same way as the great Mogols in the olden days. I'm sure he'll never think of inviting me!"

"Does that sort of spectacle attract you?"

"Attract me, my dear captain! Why, I am dying to see it. The blood of the Cuban hidalgos flows in my veins! Combats, torn pieces of flesh covered with blood, the struggle of the bull against the horse! That excites one, strings up one's nerves. Much more so then will a tiger fight."

Concha had taken her hand from his shoulder; she was standing facing him, but the animation and interest of her reply did not prevent her from looking over his shoulder at the façade of the Residence: the window at the end was one of Armstrong's rooms; Concha had

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noticed that it opened under the pergola; the others were those of the visitors' rooms.

"Captain," she murmured in her most insinuating voice, "you have many things for which you need forgiveness. . . ."

"Is that really so?" he replied, without, however, letting his surprise induce him to ask what he had done to be placed in such a position.

"But I know a very simple way . . . and a very pleasant way by which you can atone for your faults. Shall I tell you?"

She had come close up to him and appeared to be very interested in playing an arpeggio on the buttons of his tunic. In reality her eyes were fixed on the windows . . . especially on one with a light in it. . . .

"It is to take me to the wild beast fight!" she added without waiting for his answer.

"Certainly I will, with pleasure!"

"Oh, captain, you are an angel! You deserve a kiss!" she exclaimed.

Before he had time to realize what was happening, her two arms were round his neck and her lips were pressed close to his.

Left alone, Brinda thought about her happiness. Now she longed for Ronald to return and discuss the projects for the future that she dreamed about for them both. And that very evening Ronald was late, a most unusual occurrence. At first she thought that her

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impatience had made the minutes seem longer and the hours interminable, but the clock belied it: relentlessly the little hand pointed to midnight.

In spite of her annoyance, she trusted Armstrong. Every moment she expected to see him arrive. Curled up in an armchair she listened with her ear towards the silent corridor, awaiting the opening of the door and the sound of his steps on the carpet. . . .

The reading-lamp near her lit up her slim figure and her dazzling eyes; a wistful and anxious expression seemed to cast a soft halo around them as though they were delicately made up. She tried to smile. Her lips quivered, her eyelids trembled.

Voluptuous as the coo of a turtle-dove, Concha's laugh came from the garden. Brinda, startled, listened for a moment. Without being able to distinguish the words, she could hear two voices: that of a woman speaking in coaxing, amorous tones, then triumphant laughter, and Ronald's voice in reply grave and reserved.

She wished to see. She rushed to the window in the forlorn hope that her eyes would dispel this phantasmagoria that had deceived her ears. She thought she had been the victim of an hallucination.

Not realizing that the lamp would show up the outlines of her figure against the mosquito blind, she looked out into the garden. Under the shade of the pergola she saw two figures close together. A terrible revelation presented itself under the moonlight: Concha Guerrero very close to Ronald, leaning on him.

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Brinda did not cry out. She simply gazed in amazement at the sight of Ronald allowing himself to be embraced in that manner. She certainly saw him shrink away from her, but at the same time she saw his servant Jeffrey coming. In her jealousy she thought that it was his arrival that had prevented them from embracing each other. She continued to watch. When Concha leaned over his shoulder to read the letter that had been brought to him, she felt sure that they were on very intimate terms. Servants in the palace had often coupled their names in speaking of big-game hunts and receptions given by her father. When at length Concha, with an exclamation of delight, threw her arms round him, there seemed to be no doubt in her mind that they were lovers.

She went away from the window. She had seen too much. She believed that she had been deceived when she thought herself on the point of being saved. And that made the shock more terrible.

In the garden, Concha did not follow up her success. She had seen enough: a woman's shadow had appeared at one of the windows of the rooms that were supposed to be untenanted. Her suspicions were not groundless. She was anxious to inform the Maharajah. As quickly as she had embraced Ronald, she had let him go.

"Come, Armstrong," she said jokingly, "don't shrink back. Do you think I am going to bite you? I'm not a vampire. I am only a little effusive in expressing my

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delight. You gave me such pleasure when you promised to take me to-morrow to the show! I love something thrilling, you know! Come, captain, don't behave like a young bride who has found a trooper in her bedroom. You surely do not blame me for letting myself go a little in a moment of enthusiasm? "

" No, I am not so strait-laced as that."

" Then make friends, shake hands and I'll relieve you of my presence."

" You are going? "

" It is quite time. Will you order my car and, as you speak Hindustani, please tell the chauffeur to go straight to the palace. These men have funny ideas when they are driving. They very often make a detour without bothering whom they have for a passenger and take you wherever their fancy leads them. The other day I had a chauffeur who had forgotten to make his invocations to Siva, so I had to go to the temple and wait until he had consulted his god about his affairs."

" Your wishes have been carried out," said Armstrong, as he shut the door of the Rolls-Royce bearing the Maharajah's coat of arms. " After the instructions I have given to the chauffeur, I only hope you will not be deposited in a ditch as he drives wishing you at the devil."

" So do I, for you must admit that would be a pity."

" There are certainly some people who would be upset."

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"Myself to begin with," said Concha.

"Till to-morrow!"

The car shot off at full speed towards the gate. Jolted about by the ruts on the uneven road, Concha, as best she could, scribbled a note on her knees.

I have found out that Princess Brinda is staying at Captain Armstrong's. I will wait until to-morrow for Your Highness's further instructions.

She signed it with her initials. Then, as soon as she was in her apartments, she put the note into an envelope and sealed it. It only remained to take it to the Hon. Hiram Sing, who was anxiously awaiting her news.

On the rice-straw mat his Indian servant was sleeping the sleep of the empty-headed. The lowing of the sacred cows could not awaken him.

Happily, faithful to her trust, another servant was waiting for Concha to offer her her little cup of coffee and sweetmeats. She was a poor tame creature who had learnt a little English. In an indescribable jargon she ordered her:

"Go at once and take this letter to old Hiram Sing." And she finished up with: "*Djeldél Djeldél*" Meaning: "As quickly as possible."

She bowed, repeated a sentence in which Concha recognized the name of Hiram Sing, so by way of assent Concha added:

"*Djeldél . . . Bôt atchal* (very good)."

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Off she went as fast as she could to the door that Concha pointed out to her. A few minutes later, which proved that she had done exactly as she was ordered, she brought back a short note from Hiram Sing which miraculously managed to convey in two lines the most fulsome appreciation of Concha's wonderful skill and dexterity.

As soon as Concha's car had gone, the front door of the Residence had been shut. Ronald hurried across the hall. He went straight to Brinda's apartments. Hastily he knocked softly at her door.

No one replied.

He knocked more loudly, so anxious to see her that he did not scruple about awakening her. He listened. Absolute silence.

A ray of light shone under the door. He thought that she had fallen asleep while waiting for him. Softly he opened the door, meaning to awaken her from her dreams by kisses. The cosy corner was empty, the low easy chair still bore the imprint of her graceful form. The room also was empty. Brinda had disappeared.

As his eyes grasped the truth, anxiety mingled with rays of hope overwhelmed him.

He searched the room. Everything was in perfect order. This fact prevented him from thinking that she had been carried off by Hindu police. Brinda would have resisted. The servants would have heard something. Perhaps she was hiding to give him a shock.

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He called her; softly, tenderly, with authority then in despair.

She had left her hiding-place. What puzzled Armstrong was that she seemed to have done it of her own accord. Unless Father Forestier had suddenly come to fetch her owing to a favourable opportunity having presented itself for her to get away from the capital.

A letter that he found lying open on the table banished all hopes.

My friend,

You planted in my heart the seed of hope, but I have just seen in the garden that you love someone else. A woman of your own race. So I realize that my lot is to continue to suffer and to give up all hope.

From you alone I have had loving words and kind thoughts, the wretched outcast that I am. I say farewell before I die, for I admit that you have been my first and will remain my last lover.

Brinda.

In the first flush of his mortification his impulse was to rush out of the room, call his servants and organize a search for her. Then he remembered that Brinda was trying to escape, that she feared recapture by her relations more than death, and that he had sworn to do nothing to betray her presence in his house. His impulse was quelled.

He searched again, still unable to believe that Brinda

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was so mad as to want to die. He found nothing to allay his fears. Only the dark sari lay on the floor. He picked it up, put it to his face and breathed her amber perfume which increased his despair. For the first time in his life he felt weak. Brinda had kissed him upon his lips and he could not forget it.

XVII

THE Maharanee was in her bath. Her head showed above its marble rim. With slow oscillations she moved right and left. Soothed by the languid warmth of the perfumed water, the Princess was becoming sleepy, whilst in the next room her maids were busily arranging her most handsome garments and her most beautiful jewels.

Hurried steps on the floor of the bathroom caused her to open her eyes. Mirra came towards her with a sprightly air.

"Oh, my dear!" exclaimed the Maharanee. . . . "What pleasant surprise are you bringing me? You have such a brisk walk that I cannot help comparing you with a playful elephant."

"My sweet princess will, I feel sure, be pleased to hear that I have something to tell her," said Mirra.

Husbanding carefully her important news, she sat near the Maharanee on the third step leading up to the bath.

"Perhaps I ought not to have intruded upon you at this moment? Maybe Your Highness is about to take a rest. . . ."

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"Not at all! Your eyes deceive you if you think you see signs of that!"

"So may I tell you?"

"How many times is it necessary for me to say so?"

"In that case, excuse me one moment. . . ."

Waddling on her short legs, Mirra descended the three marble steps. She went to the door and gave special orders to the Princess's maids to be ready to dress their mistress. Then she let down the portière which divided the dressing-room from the bathroom. She went and sat on the edge of the bath. A triumphant smile spread over her face.

"Can't Your Highness guess?" she said, bending over the water, strewn with floating lotus flowers whose white and pink petals formed a modest covering to the Princess's submerged body.

"I don't know. . . . I can't think."

Mirra had just picked out a flower and was pulling it to pieces, petal by petal.

"Something that Your Highness longs to happen. . . . Something which has troubled us all for several days. . . . When I say all I am speaking of people of importance in our entourage."

"Do you mean that you have news of my husband's daughter?" exclaimed the Maharanee, sitting up so suddenly in the bath that she created a regular storm on the placid surface.

"Hush!" said Mirra. "The only people who are

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supposed to know it are: His Highness, Hiram Sing and the clever person who has made the necessary discovery for them. I mean our radiant star Mlle. Concha Guerrero. It is that great friend of ours who has just been to give me, under the seal of absolute secrecy, the pleasant task of bringing you the enjoyable news. For she thought you would like to know it at once."

"And where has she been found?"

"A scandalous affair! Which, in so vile a creature as His Highness's wretched daughter, does not surprise me. She has actually been hidden in the private apartments of the British Residence!"

The Princess sank back from the shock into the warm water, causing violent waves which moved the lotus flowers hither and hither.

Amazed, she exclaimed:

"Brinda at Armstrong's house!"

"Yes, Your Highness. This little slut shelters herself under the British flag. . . . A splendid way of becoming taboo and defying us all!"

"Do you think she has become his concubine?"

"Your Highness! What a question! The man would be a great fool if it were otherwise!"

"Does Mlle. Guerrero think so?"

"I have only spoken a word or two about it to her. She did not seem to care about discussing it."

"That's rather curious!" remarked the Maharanee with a quizzical smile.

"I can't understand it either," said Mirra, adopting

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the same attitude. "Perhaps she did not wish to commit herself before speaking to His Highness."

"In any case, it will suit my noble master very well, especially as he was trying to find a way to keep this Diplomatic Agent here. Now, at any rate, he has got him at his mercy."

And the Maharanee burst out laughing as if it were the funniest thing in the world.

"Brinda in that English puritan's bed? But it is most amusing. Maybe the shameless hussy executes obscene dances to him as he gets drunk on whisky! . . . Ha! ha! ha! . . . My august husband did not expect anything like that."

"It will console him for being disappointed over this shrew's marriage. For, I suppose, after this beautiful escapade Prince Keshab will not want her!"

"Not as a wife, obviously!" added the Maharanee as she hoisted herself out of the bath, swamping the remaining lotus flowers as she did so. "Perhaps a deal might be arranged and one could offer her later as a slave. Well-dressed, she would be attractive. But that would certainly lead to complications. . . . Just give me my blue sari, my dear. . . . I'm beginning to shiver. I should like to know how they heat this palace. When I had braziers I got plenty of warmth. Since they have been replaced by those iron serpents because it is the twentieth century by the Western calendar and braziers are looked upon as barbarous things, one has no comfort."

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"Come in, women! Her Highness wants you," Mirra called out, clapping her hands.

The portière swelled out under the pressure of ten hands eager to push it aside. It was eventually opened and the Maharanee's maids seized their mistress. One rubbed her loins and her back. Another powdered her neck and breasts. A third with towels began to dry her toes. A fourth rubbed her shoulders and arms. The other waited patiently with her fine linen dress.

"Your Highness has a skin as soft as the trunk of a newly born elephant," Mirra remarked, who never let slip an opportunity of paying a compliment.

The Maharanee smiled. She was proud of her skin. It was very beautiful. With a finger she brushed away a drop of water that still trickled down her shoulder.

"The gods indeed did not forget me when they handed out that attribute of beauty!" she replied. "Come, my girls, hurry up! If you take so long to put on my dress the bugles will sound the beginning of the fête before I have put the last touch to my toilette. You are very silent, Mirra. Are you *distrain*?"

"No, my dear Princess, beautiful as the summer moon, I was only looking out of the window."

"And does the palace courtyard offer something so new and attractive that it makes you forget us?"

"The courtyard is, to tell the truth, just the same as usual. It is the people who are chattering in it who interest me."

"People?" asked the Maharanee, putting her head

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through the embroidered silk and gold muslin that was just being put over her lawn dress. "What sort of people? People taking part in the fête no doubt?"

"I can't see," Mirra admitted, after leaning out at the risk of falling twenty feet to the ground. "They are too far away, I can't tell. . . . They look like Brahmins. But here is old Sarata running in this direction. She will be able to tell us what is happening down there. Now, old woman, come along! Come up here to us!"

"What does she say?"

"She is coming up now!"

"Something must have happened!"

"The tiger that is to be let loose in the arena has perhaps escaped?" said one of the women. "It happened once, seventeen years ago, my mother told me. In order to make him more savage when he fights the buffalo, they keep him shut up for several days without food. He was so savage that he killed everybody he came across. He became a terrible man-eater, and special battues had to be arranged to rid the district of him."

With cries of alarm the Maharance's women ceased their duties. And seeing them turn pale, the story-teller felt triumphant.

"Fool that you are!" said the Princess angrily. "What do you mean by telling us about your escaped tiger? And the rest of you, what is all the alarm about? As if you had never before heard of the victims of the lordly Mr. Tiger! You get on at once with my hair. . . . And you, finish painting my feet. I will have your

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fingers rapped this evening if my toilet is not finished in time! ”

A buzz of excuses came from the women's lips. They continued their work, but their hearts were not in it. The arrival of the old woman put an end to their panic. She prostrated herself before the Maharanee, calling out in broken sentences between her gasps, for the stairs were high for her at her age:

“Venerated mistress, I have something to tell you which will trouble you. The Princess Brinda has been lost! ”

“That's fresh news! ” said Mirra in a superior tone, whispering to the Maharanee.

“You may not believe me, perhaps, but it is absolutely true,” the old woman insisted, deceived by the two women's smiles. “But don't be alarmed; she has been found.”

“Who has told you that, you old dotard! ” retorted Mirra, annoyed to find that so humble a servant knew, almost as soon as she did, news of such importance.

“Let her speak, Mirra. . . . Tell me first, woman, from whom you got this news? ”

“Why,” said the old woman, who had become dumb owing to the interruption, and who only recovered her presence of mind when she saw the Maharanee bend over her with curiosity, “that is what has brought all these people there, to the doors. They are going to see her brought back upon a stretcher. . . . It is the priests of the temple of Krishna who are carrying her.”

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"Priests? What have they got to do with it?" asked the Maharanee, whose eyes looked questioningly more at Mirra than at the old woman.

"I am at a loss myself, Highness! Tell us, old woman, what more do you know?"

"Alas! it is not for an old woman like me to ask the priests questions! But if my tongue was tied by respect, I kept my ears open. I listened to what was said, so as to be able to report to my sovereign, who is more beautiful than the rising sun, more precious than the stars of night. . . ."

"Well, come along, say what you have to say!"

"It was said that Princess Brinda threw herself last night into the Golden Lotus pond near the temple of Krishna. . . . So as to make sure that she died," added the old woman, lowering her voice in a tone of secrecy, "she had a heavy stone tied to her foot. The gods had doubtless decreed otherwise for her. The stone getting entangled in some grass kept her up, and a priest who was meditating out of doors saw the body floating. He rescued it. The Princess had only fainted. They brought her round, in the outer buildings of the temple. She would not say who she was. Then, this morning, all the priests went to see her, and one of them recognized her."

"What has happened to her now?"

"I was going to tell our venerated sovereign when Your Grace interrupted me," said the old woman, bowing and looking timidly towards Mirra. "Danah was

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in the courtyard with the others. She threw herself in tears on the Princess and took her to her room."

"Mirra!" said the Maharanee sharply. "Take these women with you, go to this worthless girl and bring her to me. I wish to be the first to speak to her."

"I will do so, Highness!"

And Mirra, bursting with curiosity, disappeared with the women.

"There, old woman," said the Maharanee, taking a handful of rupees from a chest and throwing them into the old woman's lap. "That's for your trouble. . . . You have done well. Now you can go, I don't want you any further."

"May Sita guard you, O mistress! May your days be happy and your bed be visited by pleasant dreams! May your heart . . ."

The Maharanee interrupted her:

"Yes! Yes! That will do. Thank you for your good wishes. That's enough! Do as I tell you—go!"

"Your wishes are commands and your commands are more precious to me than my life and the life of all my family . . ." added the old woman as she retired backwards so as to be able to salute her munificent mistress once again.

In the corridor she met the cortège bringing Brinda. As old Sarata was only a poor and blindly devoted servant to all the members of the royal family, she saw no harm in expressing to the young Princess the same

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good wishes as she had offered to her omnipotent step-mother.

"Compose yourself, pale young lady," she said. "Do not weep, sweet child: like a kindly moon, your Maharance is going to bend over you so that your days may be happy!"

A sharp cuff from Mirra invited her to discern more clearly the family sympathies. She fell on the floor amidst a jingle of scattering rupees. Very confused, she collected her fortune and made her way to the kitchens, having learnt by experience, she explained to those who did not know it, that the finding of the Princess alive was not one of those happy events which one can shout from the housetops.

Brinda was now alone with her step-mother, who was attended by Mirra. Inwardly she was suffering the tortures of the damned.

The two women had spat upon her worn sari that the Brahmin priests had lent her.

She had not flinched. They had insulted her, calling her the most outrageous names, comparing her to the vilest of beasts. She had said nothing. Then, exasperated by her silence, they went so far as to attack her regarding her relationship with Captain Armstrong.

"Shameless she-monkey! You went to this white man to throw yourself into his arms! . . ."

Her blood rose. Her face became scarlet. Her eyes flashed with rage. She raised her hand in vengeance.

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Without striking, she lowered it. She turned deathly pale. Her expression showed supreme contempt.

"I refuse to take notice of your insults," she said. "I ignore the fact that you are abject reptiles, both of you. The venom that falls from your lips is not worthy of consideration."

"Oh, that's it, is it!" screamed the Maharanee. "I am an abject reptile, am I? And my remarks are of so little consequence in your highly superior eyes that you do not condescend to take any notice of them. Very well! I will tell you something that I hope may be worthy of your attention. You wished to die to-night. You tried to drown yourself in the Golden Lotus pond. Well, I will arrange another death for you."

"If you are speaking the truth," Brinda replied calmly, "it will be the first kind action that I have had from you. I only beg for one thing: that is, to be allowed to die."

"Wait a moment, young woman! I did not say I would give you permission to throw yourself in another pond! . . . You might be pulled out again. The death that I offer you will not be of your own choosing, but of mine, and I will also settle the time and the manner!"

"That doesn't matter so long as I don't have to wait too long."

"You may rely on me! Your corpse will be cold before sunset this evening."

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"Thank you, madame. I did not expect so much from you."

"You talk like that, do you!" said Mirra. "You have, then, no regrets in leaving life. Not even the caresses in your lover's arms?"

Brinda gave her a cold, contemptuous look.

"You mean that for humour, I suppose. I congratulate you. It is a pity that you have not a more appreciative audience for your witty sallies!"

"True, she has not been very amusing. But I find you rather peculiar in accepting my offer without even knowing what it is," remarked the Maharanee.

"If I had asked any questions or raised any objections, would you have taken any notice?"

"No!"

"So I thought. Then what would have been the use? Besides, however torturing it may be, the death that you arrange will not frighten me. It will be less intolerable than living."

"You wish me to spare you, or you would not speak like that!" said the Maharanee.

At this frank statement, a passing smile crossed Brinda's face.

"I did not think of appealing to the kind feelings that I know you have always had for me. Do not hesitate. If I don't die at your hands to-day I shall soon end my life. I shall find a way, because I do not wish to live!"

The young Princess had spoken in a tone of mad despair that made a marked effect on the two women.

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They looked at her with a sort of awe-stricken regard. After a few moments the Maharanee continued the interview.

"Follow my women to your room, and remember that in agreeing to my proposals you accept all my decisions. Leave me! Mirra will carry out my orders. I shall not go back on my determination. Whether you like it or not, you will die as I have decreed!"

Brinda bowed. She retired with the servants without there being any need for them to hold her by the wrists.

"Mirra," said the Maharanee, "these are the people I wish you to bring to me!"

Into the ear of her maid of honour she repeated names which made the Hindu raise her eyebrows and open her eyes.

"You will take them to my second audience chamber: the one that has no windows, and walls so thick that they have not ears. It is needless, I think, to add that all your actions must be secret. . . . Brinda has had enough of life! . . . I will find her a surprise which will satisfy her most cherished desires."

XVIII

At four o'clock the relentless sun poured its burning rays upon the old fort. Under its cruel light, the granite walls looked as angry as an open sore. This brutal symphony in red did not spread to the arena where the benches were thronged with thousands of Hindus dressed in white dhotis.

On each tier the brown faces shone under the coloured turbans and the black skull-caps of the devotees of Mahatma. In the over-heated circus the stifling warmth from all these closely packed bodies which had perspired there for many hours, rose to the sky.

With laughter and murmurs of delight, the crowd waited. It had waited patiently, clamouring round the front of the doors until a fanfare on the bugles gave the signal to enter. After that it had waited for a long time till the Maharajah's box under a canopy on the north of the arena gradually filled up.

The officials, the officers from the palace, had come first. They presented a thin line of white tunics against the purple curtain at the back. The line which came next had more gold lace, with here and there coloured

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sashes. In the rows nearer to His Highness's dazzling throne the uniforms became more shimmering, the colours more varied, and jewels more profuse and opulent.

Hiram Sing glittered under his tunic and the ruby brooch which fastened his turban. The uniform of the chief of the shikaris vied with the blue of the sky in its dazzling colour, whilst near to him the violet lace, rich as an Indian summer night, covered the breast of the Maharajah's doctor. Modestly, Kumbha Sing, the aide-de-camp, released for the occasion from the confinement to which he had been sentenced since the night of the ball at the Residence, wore grey satin soft as the plumage of a dove.

Later, all heads were turned towards the latticed box reserved for the Maharanee and the ladies of the zenana. The rattle of the drawing of the curtains could be heard behind the trellis-work where, unseen by those present, the Princess came to attend the fête. The respectful and docile crowd bowed in that direction; it was an opportunity to move slightly; an interlude before the long-awaited spectacle began.

At last the Maharajah appeared, accompanied by two visitors of importance, for whom gilded chairs had been provided on either side of the throne. The spectators stood and for a long time acclaimed the Prince and his guests: Mlle. Guerrero rose, blooming and contented, playfully casting languishing eyes at Armstrong, who gave her his arm. He remained erect and unperturbed.

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Not a muscle of his face indicated that he had any other more pressing interest than that of coming to preside at a wild beast fight.

He personified by his silence the importance of his official position, and appeared to carry on his broad shoulders the responsibilities of the British Empire. To fathom the depth of his sadness of heart, it would be necessary to penetrate deeper than his outward expression. But he was so unbending, so distinguished in bearing, in spite of the anxiety which obsessed him, that no one would have dared to try to do so.

The Maharajah took his place, Captain Armstrong on his right, Mlle. Guerrero on his left.

After that, the crowd sat down on the burning benches. Their wait was at an end. They gave a sigh of relief followed by expressions of delight. The nautch girls came into the arena. Although this was not, as a matter of fact, the spectacle they had come to witness, the Hindus showed their appreciation. An almost religious silence pervaded the audience. Thousands of eager eyes followed the skilful undulations of the little dancers dressed in yellow and green saris, the snake-like rhythm of their sinuous bodies, the waving movements of their arms and the play of their long fingers made still longer by their golden claws.

Armstrong watched the performance like a person in a dream. By almost miraculous will-power he controlled a double personality. Whilst his private mind hovered round the room that Brinda had left to go to

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her death, his official mind was capable of dominating his motionless body and appreciating merely by a nod of the head the remarks of his entourage or replying with affability to the banal remarks that the Prince kept showering upon him.

Concha, however, for the most part monopolized the attention of His Highness. She wanted to know everything—the translation of the verses that were being sung and the meaning of the various ritualistic gestures of the dancers in the arena.

“And after this what happens?”

“There will be more dances.”

“What, still more dances!” she exclaimed in a disappointed tone. “Captain Armstrong told me that there would be wild beasts fighting one another! He gave me a vivid description of a tiger fighting a buffalo. Tell me, captain, didn’t you say so?”

“Certainly I did, mademoiselle. I don’t think there has been any change of the programme in that respect. However, His Highness knows more about it than I do.”

“No, rest assured, my dear Concha with the eyes of a gazelle, as the honourable captain says, I have not curtailed in any way the entertainment that I intend to offer; you will see very shortly the combat that you are looking forward to. You know quite well, sweet star, that one always keeps to the last the most wonderful spectacle that it is possible to present in my State, the combat of wild beasts in honour of distinguished visitors. In former times, in the days of the Great Mogols, when

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Akbar conquered Rajputana and when Aurangzeb reigned over Agra, my ancestors Sandra Bahadur and Ranjit Sing organized sensational combats in which ten tigers fought ten wild buffaloes, and twenty cobras attacked twenty mongooses. . . ."

"But . . . that must surely have been a very sanguinary spectacle?"

"It would be difficult to imagine it otherwise," said the Maharajah, laughing. "The tiger and the buffalo are not gentlemen that can be taught to control their feelings. As soon as one puts them together, they have no ideas beyond rushing at each other fiercely and using their claws and horns to the best of their ability. The tiger springs, but the buffalo can kick terribly hard and has a trick of goring his foe on his horns and tossing him up into the air. This terrifies the tiger."

"And the tiger . . . when he falls, does he always fall in the arena?" asked Concha a little nervously.

The Prince smiled ironically:

"Not always. . . . There is no fixed rule about it. It sometimes happens that he falls amongst the spectators!"

"Oh! What do you say, Highness?"

Concha turned pale and thought of her timidity when she was with Armstrong.

"I was saying that the tiger falls where he can. But don't be alarmed, my radiant friend. 'You are pale. My box is much too high to make an accident of that kind possible. If the tiger falls amongst the audience,

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it will be on the occupants in the lower tiers down there . . . amongst the pariahs and other people who are of no consequence. It would only mean that there would be a few less untouchables. Pah! They have to die one day."

"Ah! I can breathe more freely! I love danger immensely—when I am safe. . . . Tell me . . . I suppose the spectacle only ends when one of the two beasts is dead?"

"Of course, otherwise it would not be a spectacle! The tiger and the buffalo are such good fighters that both antagonists often die at the same time and it is impossible to say which is the victor."

"I should like to see that!" exclaimed Concha, trembling with excitement. "Where do they come into the arena?"

"By these two doors, under my box. You can see them if you lean over. The one on the left is the tigers' entrance, the buffaloes come on through the one on the right."

"Who goes down and opens the doors?"

"Nobody. If anyone did, they would not have much chance of coming up alive. Before killing each other, their first thought would be to kill him."

"Then how do the doors open? Do you just say 'Sesame' and they open like in a fairy story?"

"Very nearly as miraculously, thanks to the marvellous inventions that your European engineers have introduced to us. I shall press one and then another of these

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buttons. They will set in motion the electric mechanism which opens the doors. Formerly, when we were ignorant and barbarous," the Maharajah continued with a look of humility in Armstrong's direction, "when we disregarded the sciences and only paid attention to poetry, the arts and astronomy, instead of these wonderful doors we had heavy traps which were raised up and down by ropes and levers. Those rings that you see in the walls beside the doors were used for that purpose."

"Would Your Highness like to confer a great favour upon me?" pleaded Concha in her softest voice and with her most pleasing smile.

"Say what it is, child of the gods. You know that I can refuse you nothing!" replied the Prince gallantly.

"I should like to press the button that opens the tigers' door."

"You shall have your wish!"

And turning to his neighbour, the Maharajah added:

"Captain Armstrong, will you do me the honour of working the mechanism of the other door?"

"With pleasure, Your Highness. It is an honour I appreciate."

His reserve irritated Concha.

"What an imperturbable person you are, captain! I really believe you would play a part in the general resurrection of the dead without showing the slightest astonishment."

"And why not, my dear charmer?" remarked the

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Maharajah. "Our gallant captain has had a Christian education. He knows his Scriptures. Are there not enough details in them for a gentleman to be able to take part in the realization of the predictions with a cool head?"

"Look! See! The dancers are going off!" said Concha, leaving the Maharajah to his reflections. "Can I press the button straight away?"

"I am afraid you must wait a while. We must give the spectators a few minutes to unbend. Then the bugles will sound. Then you shall press the famous button. And when the tiger has got well into the arena it will be Captain Armstrong's turn to press the button that he has in front of him."

The whole of the audience undoubtedly shared Concha's taste for exciting spectacles, because nobody moved during the respite that was given them. Then the trumpeters sounded their bugles and a military call rang out above their heads.

"Now!" the Maharajah commanded.

Concha bent over the apparatus. Her fingers with their tinted nails pressed the button. The well-oiled bolt slipped back. With a great leap the tiger entered the arena. In order to get a better view the spectators rose up and leant over, one behind the other. Influenced by the environment, Armstrong watched the opening of the drama with interest.

It was indeed a spectacle. The first bound of the tiger had not taken him far. He was dazzled by the

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strong light. Taken aback by the cries of the crowd at his appearance, he remained cowering on the sand, his ears thrown back, his eyes blinking, his powerful tail lashing his sides that were panting with alarm. Slowly he got up. His striped body undulated. He stretched his legs, pushing his claws alternatively into the sand. As lord of the jungle he seemed to be imprinting his mark on the floor. Then majestically he made a tour round the arena.

"Now you, captain! Quickly!" Concha insisted.

The first excitement of the appearance of the tiger being over, the interest was turned towards the door that released the buffalo. Through the bars of the trellised box one could see the Maharance's face strangely agitated.

Armstrong put out his hand. He seemed to hesitate in pressing the button. Concha had to remind him to do it.

"Come, captain! You are keeping us waiting!"

Armstrong had to look at her before he realized what she was saying. The Maharajah bent over to his neighbour and remarked:

"When you are ready, captain." And he pointed to the mechanism.

Armstrong pressed the button, and just as Concha had done, leaned over to see the second animal come out.

At that moment an amazed silence fell over the audience. Then a growing shout followed by screams of terror came from the benches. One might have

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thought that the thousands of spectators were bemused by some apparition.

Clothed in gauze, looking like a golden idol, Brinda stood at the door, her face sublime and deathly pale as one imagines the early Christians when they were thrown to the wild beasts. Without any hesitation, she began to walk forward, looking across the arena at the tiger which stood still ready to spring.

Armstrong, without an instant's hesitation, leapt out of his seat on to the front of the box. By the help of the iron staples that the Maharajah had pointed out to Concha, he quickly got down into the arena. He knew that he had only three or four seconds to spare if he were to succeed in his daring attempt. The tiger, in fact, was skirting the opposite wall, making ready to attack his quarry. He must needs attack with all speed.

He took Brinda in his left arm and dragged her towards the iron staples and the uneven wall. In the indescribable uproar all assistance was out of the question. It was only in the Maharajah's box that calm prevailed. Everyone waited to see the attitude of the Prince so as to copy it. But torn between amazement and resentment against his wife, whom he realized was the instigator of the attempted murder, he gave no outward indication of his feelings.

The tiger, seeing the tempting morsel that this human couple offered, dashed towards them.

But Armstrong, carrying Brinda, was climbing on to the first ledges of the walls. From above, hands were

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stretched downwards ready to help as soon as they could reach him.

A terrible shriek suddenly came from the spectators. Ten yards away the beast was about to spring. The strength of his paws, accurate as a machine, sent him towards them with his claws out. But foreseeing this, Ronald climbed the wall with tremendous speed.

Suddenly the sharp crack of a revolver rang out. Hit in the shoulder, the tiger fell heavily.

"Take your time, sir!" said a familiar voice to the captain. "Pick the best places for your feet. I have the beast covered with my revolver if he attacks again."

A second shot. Made furious by the pain of his broken paw, the animal was just about to pounce when he fell on the ground with a bullet through his head. It was Armstrong's secretary who, pushing aside the noble occupants of the Prince's box, had rushed to the front to fire two shots with his revolver.

Armstrong was now on the top of the wall amongst the spectators. His first task was to unfasten the bands that tied Brinda's hands. To hide her from inquisitive observers, he drew her to him. Lifting his right hand he motioned to the crowd to silence.

Turning to the Prince he said:

"Your Highness must forgive me for interrupting the programme. But I have not been invited to an execution of this kind. . . . I ask your permission to take this young girl to the Residence. Let the fête go on."

There were murmurs of applause on all sides. The

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Maharajah was standing and seemed to be about to intervene. He did not know whether to congratulate Armstrong for his heroic act or to reproach him for having interfered with the murderous plan of the Maharanee.

"Your Highness does not seem to encourage me to find the culprits," said Armstrong in a loud voice, "who cannot be far away. If no one takes any action on behalf of this unhappy young girl, I shall try and forget all about it. But understand that on the first opportunity I shall search for the unnatural parents who have sent her into the arena. However important and powerful they may be, I shall bring them before the British Courts for having broken the law prohibiting human sacrifices."

The Maharajah had sat down. The only sounds to be heard were the cries of the Maharanee as she was taken from her box in a fit of hysterics.

When Brinda and Armstrong left, the crowd made way respectfully. Few people knew that it was the Princess, but they understood that people in high positions had been interested in her death, and they trembled at the thought of the possible person.

In the Prince's box, the courtesans were silent, not daring to comment on the event. Hiram Sing whispered to the Maharajah and asked what he should do in order to relieve the solemn air that had come over the populace. Quite unmoved, the Prince replied:

"Well, Captain Armstrong said, 'Let the fête go on.'"

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... Order another tiger to be let in as quickly as possible! "

The Maharajah, still affecting absolute unconcern, looking for Concha, asked his aide-de-camp:

"Where has Mlle. Guerrero gone? "

"I think she has gone to console Her Highness the Maharanee."

"Very well. . . . You can tell her from me, to-morrow morning, that her presence at the palace is no longer necessary. I command you to take her by car to Calcutta."

"Your Highness's orders shall be carried out. But if Mlle. Guerrero speaks to me about the emeralds? "

"You can tell her that they were a mirage, and that she has not been able to realize them. However, so that she shall not leave the palace empty-handed, you can give her on my behalf a box of over-ripe mangoes. She will understand. For, unless I am mistaken, it is with over-ripe apples that in Europe one rewards actors when they have played their parts badly."

The Maharajah smiled sardonically.

Kumbha Sing replied with a knowing wink. He was about to withdraw when the Prince called him back:

"Ah! I forgot the most important thing. . . . Let Captain Armstrong know that I shall expect him in audience at the palace to-morrow at ten o'clock."

Armstrong had just sat down facing the Maharajah.

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The Minister of the Interior, Hiram Sing, had discreetly withdrawn at the instructions of the Prince, who intended to speak to the Political Agent without any witnesses.

"Captain," he began, "after yesterday's unexpected incident it was impossible to have any discussion on the affair in my box. I allowed you to leave after your heroic rescue."

"It was merely a very natural act. At any rate Your Highness ought to regret less than anyone that I saved the life of your own daughter."

"You know who Brinda is?"

"I did not know yesterday afternoon. It was only last evening that the Princess revealed her identity to me."

"You are aware then, captain, of the gravity of your action."

The Maharajah's reply nettled Armstrong. He replied acidly:

"I am indeed aware that in rescuing Princess Brinda from the tiger I have upset the plans of the person who wished to get rid of her. But I very much doubt that Your Highness blames me for having thwarted the Maharanee's vengeance."

"And why, captain?"

"Because, putting paternal affection aside for the moment, Your Highness's political position would have suffered by its occurrence."

"Explain yourself, if you please."

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"If Your Highness wishes explanations, he shall have them. If the drama had been played out according to the blood-thirsty wishes of the Maharanee, the report I should have sent to the Viceroy would have had serious consequences for you."

The Maharajah got up. Armstrong did the same.

"Are you threatening me, captain?"

"No, because it is a question of a menace that has passed. . . . I said—if. . . . Your Highness knows the attitude of His Excellency the Viceroy on such matters. . . . Indian princes have been removed for less serious crimes."

"I know. . . . Great Britain abuses her power in dealing with us, captain."

"She does not abuse her power, Highness. She insists upon the laws of humanity being respected. However, in the circumstances, we need not discuss it, since it did not happen, and as regards myself, I am officially unaware that there has been any attempt on the life of the Princess."

Armstrong's conciliatory tone had the effect of inducing the Maharajah to sit down. He had been thinking things over since the previous evening, and had been weighing the serious consequences that the Maharanee's unpardonable act might have. It was to his advantage to be diplomatic and to make the most out of Armstrong's feelings towards his daughter. He replied:

"Captain, I note with pleasure what you have just said: namely, that you are officially unaware of what

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happened in the old fort. . . . I should like to feel that our conversation will have no ill consequences. . . .”

“You may rest assured on that point.”

“May I speak to you as man to man . . . or shall I say friend to friend?”

“Certainly.”

“Captain Armstrong, if I ask you a question which is perhaps rather personal, regarding Princess Brinda, will you answer me frankly?”

“Quite frankly.”

“Is it true that you have a certain admiration for my daughter?”

“I said I would be frank to Your Highness. I reply then simply that I love Princess Brinda. The sincerity of my feelings towards her is greater than when she was brought to my house—without my knowing her identity—as a poor persecuted little girl who needed protection.”

“What then are your intentions?”

“To become engaged to her. The Princess shares my love and is ready later on to become my wife. I trust that Your Highness will give his consent.”

“Captain Armstrong, you shall have it on one condition. . . . Not a very hard one, I think. . . . I ask you not to leave Jahlpore until the present negotiations for the construction of the canal are, with your help, brought to a successful conclusion.”

“I can promise Your Highness that.”

As they shook hands there was a knock at the door.

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Kumbha Sing came in saying that he had something important to say to the Maharajah. The Prince took him to the far end of the room.

"What is it?"

"It concerns Concha Guerrero. She has not been able to eat the over-ripe mangoes—I mean figuratively—and fainted whilst her luggage was being put into the car. I want to ask Your Highness what I shall do."

"First put some smelling-salts under her nose!"

The Maharajah felt in his tunic and looked at his hands. He was wearing a beautiful iridescent pearl ring, one of the hundreds he possessed. He took it off, saying to his aide:

"Look here! I am sorry for this wretched vamp of a woman. Here is a pearl for her. In London she can sell it for five thousand pounds. That will be some compensation for her fruitless mission."

"I will give it to her from Your Highness when we reach Calcutta."

"Yes."

And smiling sarcastically he added:

"And if Concha Guerrero attracts you, I make no objection to you negotiating with her in return for it. You understand me, don't you? You can show it to her first and tell her she can have it if she allows you to compare it with the beauty of her skin."

"Your Highness is very generous."

"To Concha?"

"No, to me!"

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With a smile the Maharajah dismissed his genial aide-de-camp and went back to Captain Armstrong. It was agreed between them that, in order to keep Brinda out of harm's way, she should stay at the Residence until Armstrong's next leave, when he could take her to his family. Their conversation was interrupted by the sound of a motor-horn in the courtyard of the palace. Two cars were starting. One with Kumbha Sing and his companion and the other with her luggage.

Armstrong, who did not recognize Concha, asked with curiosity:

"Hallo! Who is leaving the palace?"

The Maharajah took him by the arm and whispered confidentially:

"A lady who has missed her vocation, my friend!"

Three months later. The setting sun is gilding the majestic arches of the Gate of the East at Bombay, the busy terraces of the Taj Mahal Hotel, the Yacht Club and the white villas on the Malabar Hill.

On the deck of a liner Armstrong and Brinda, arm in arm, are promenading up and down waiting for the dinner gong to sound. Their faces indicate contentment. They are enjoying the soft sea breezes and the rich splendour of the evening light. They are making plans for their approaching wedding and looking forward to a future of intense happiness.

"Dearest," said Armstrong, bending over to his companion, whose well-shaped arm he pressed, "repeat

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those beautiful lines of Tagore on love that you recited to me in the moonlight when the Residence was asleep on that enchanting summer night."

Brinda's large eyes are turned to her fiancé.

" 'Happy is he who reaches the door of the temple.
Still happier he who enters the sanctuary.' "

They had reached the taffrail. Before them lay the Indian Ocean stretching away to infinity. Brinda stopped to gaze at the horizon. It was as though her large eyes were trying to annihilate space and distinguish the continent of Europe, where her happiness lay. With a delightful gesture she took her rescuer's hand and, putting it to her face, she murmured so softly that he could only just hear her words as they were carried away on the evening breeze:

"I love life now, Ronald. . . . I love it because I am going to live it with you."

THE END

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